Daisy's Adventures: Elemental Odyssey

By: Lucent Shadow

Daisy must embark on a perilous journey with high-stakes! The elements of the world are being corrupted by a mysterious being in the background, causing mass disorder. She'll need all her skills, all her courage, and all her willpower to pull through in an all-new adventure unlike any other! It's the ultimate test of Daisy's character!

Status: complete

Published: 2015-07-31

Updated: 2015-11-20

Words: 178221

Chapters: 42

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Fantasy/Adventure - Characters: Daisy, Bowser, Rosetta/Rosalina - Reviews: 39 - Favs: 39 - Follows: 27

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11417804/1/Daisy-s-Adventures-Elemental-Odyssey

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Daisy's Adventures: Elemental Odyssey

Introduction
Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI
Chapter XVII
Chapter XVIII
Chapter XIX
Chapter XX
Chapter XXI
Chapter XXII
Chapter XXIII
Chapter XXIV
Chapter XXV
Chapter XXVI
Chapter XXVII

Chapter XXVIII
Chapter XXIX
Chapter XXX
Chapter XXXI
Chapter XXXII
Chapter XXXIII
Chapter XXXIV
Chapter XXXV
Chapter XXXVI
Chapter XXXVII
Chapter XXXVIII
Chapter XXXIX
Chapter XL
Chapter XLI
Chapter XLII - FINAL

Chapter I

Elemental Odyssey

Prelude to Battle :

That was the last straw! For several nights in a row, macabre dreams of an otherworldly nature had been invading Daisy's slumber. These dreams had been interfering with her sleep and sapping her of strength to the point where she somehow knew that they were just no string of random occurrences. No, something was different; something had changed, and there was no telling what it could be.

It was the witching hour on a cool, brisk autumn night as she walked through an open forest, images of her elemental abilities failing her and turning against her. She only had on an orange training shirt and black training shorts and shoes, but the cool air felt comforting. Not comforting enough though, for the cryptic and horrific visions from her dreams continued flooding her mind as she walked deeper through the forest path. The bizarre images grew ever more vivid; simultaneous suffocation underground, impalement by numerous crystals, crushing weight of sediment in all directions, and seismic forces threatening to rip her body apart. *No, not images, not visions,* she thought. *You can't feel visions* .

She then began to recall the voices she heard in the night. Voices that echoed and reverberated in her mind without ceasing:

Daisy...

Daisy...

Daisy... the time has come... your presence is necessary...

Her attention was drawn back to reality as she sensed a familiar presence. She turned her head to a clearing of open field off to the side to see the King of all Koopas marching towards her.

"What are you doing out here at this time of night?" Daisy asked.

"I should ask you the same thing myself," came the response from Bowser. "But then again, I never see you around anywhere at any other time in the first place."

Daisy gave a soft chuckle under her breath. "Yeah, it just so happens to be that way a lot of the time. But look where I am now that I've been having such morbid dreams lately."

"I need to go to The Forest Meadow to talk to Rosalina," Bowser responded. "I've been having rather unsettling dreams myself. Dreams where I am engulfed by my own flames, melted and charred alive at the same time, leaving nothing behind but my own skeleton. I'm assuming you're looking to talk to Rosalina as well?"

"You assumed correctly. C'mon."

The two made their way underneath the lunar light and the trees. The path they walked was lined with greenery, but there really weren't that many trees in total in the forest at all. To the right, Mushroom City was easily visible about a mile away, and on the left, the Solidus Mountain Range was visible far off in the distance. It wasn't long before they reached the outcropping of the meadow grounds. Apparently, Rosalina had anticipated their presence, as an astral clone of her body appeared seconds after they arrived.

"Greetings, you two," Rosalina said.

"What are you up to? Why are you messing with my head?!" exclaimed Bowser, suddenly irate.

"I did nothing," the Elder of the Cosmos replied. "I do know what is going on, to an extent, but I did not do a thing."

"Is this how you get-off?!" Bowser growled. "Do you know who you're screwing with here?!" He looked ready to lose what little patience his midnight awakening let him use.

"I know you both have been experiencing magnificently frightful visions in the last several nights," Rosalina continued. "Cryptic visions, malicious visions...apocalyptic visions... Listen carefully as I

bring to you words of great importance from the stars above, from the cosmos that look down upon us all. These visions are a call to duty, a cry for help. The world is in grave danger and is on the brink of absolute chaos!"

Daisy and Bowser shared an intense look of before Rosalina went on. "A great and powerful figure has dispatched forces across the western continent here and has meddled with the sacred elemental shrines. In doing so, this being has started a chain reaction that is distorting nature as we know it!"

"So who exactly are we dealing with here?" Bowser asked.

"What exactly does this being hope to accomplish?" asked Daisy. "Why mess with the order of nature? This is all sounding really demented already!"

"What makes things worse is that this being is of unknown origin and has somehow been able to evade much of the sight of the overseers of the universe," Rosalina added. "Not even I have any information on him, although I will continue to decipher what the cosmos reveal in hopes of uncovering this grave mystery. Fortunately enough, this being was seen enough for counter measures to be made. I believe his actions have been the catalyst for your nightmares, but the dreams that you have been having are proof enough of the corruption of the elemental shrines. However, only those destined to purify the shrines have been receiving these dreams. The physical pains that you have gone through as a result of your dreams show your connections to the elements. Hopefully you realize that the affinity to your respective elements carries much more meaning and importance than you thought before."

"I have always done what I could to make sure I was as connected to earth as I could be," said Daisy. "Though the connection has never been more apparent than it is now."

"Can you please spare some breath to try and explain what exactly these, 'elemental shrines' are?" Bowser questioned.

"You must have heard of them!" Daisy said to Bowser. "At least one of them?"

"I may have – my memory's not very good right now, considering the lack of sleep," Bowser replied.

"Each element has a shrine which contains an elemental gemstone," Rosalina explained. "The elemental gemstones are what has kept nature in the balance that it has been in since its inception long ago. You must travel to and purify these eight shrines and cleanse them of the creatures that have infiltrated, invaded, and infested the sacred grounds. Fire, Stone, Earth, Water, Air, Ice, Light, Shadow; all have been corrupted by a malevolent force working in the background. I'm not even sure of the magnitude of this malevolent force or how it came to be. Figuring out that part is going to be up to you."

Daisy and Bowser both then shared a surprised look, but made sure they gave Rosalina their full attention. The mission the Elder of the Cosmos described certainly seemed like one not to ignore.

"Daisy – Earthen Spirit – and Bowser – Flame Titan – do not ignore the call to destiny," Rosalina urged. "Please accept this monumental mission!"

Earthen Spirit, Flame Titan, Daisy thought. *Why'd she call us that? I'm an earth wielder, and Bowser's a fire wielder, but I don't think I've ever heard any earth or fire wielder called either one of those...*

"Why can't one person do it?" Bowser asked Rosalina with irritation. "Or better yet, why don't you do it? Purifying shrines and fighting a super-powered being? That's right up your alley!"

"I don't know," said Daisy. "The prospect of facing a being with such power definitely sounds like fun!"

"I'm not saying I can't handle it," Bowser said. "But why us two? Can't you get somebody else?"

"It is not so simple," Rosalina answered. "A shrine can only be cleansed by the destined wielder of its own element."

"WHAT?!" exclaimed Bowser. "Explain how we are supposed to cleanse these shrines with just the two of us then? I hope you don't

expect me to pull icicles out my ass!"

"You both have key roles to play in this grand act," Rosalina assured. "And destiny has allies in store for you if you are ready and willing to trust it. Each ally will be of a different element and you will not have to worry too much about searching for them. There are six others out there that you have not yet encountered but who have all experienced similar troubles. Everything will fall into place, all this the stars have revealed to me."

"So why didn't you call in Mario to do your dirty work for you?" Bowser asked in skepticism.

Daisy wanted to say something similar. Mario and Luigi had always been the ones handling all the heavy-duty missions. Despite all the training she had done, she had never been given a chance to show what she can do. Out of respect for Rosalina, she refrained from saying anything.

"I had no control over the nightmares of which you have been experiencing," said Rosalina. "Although you and Mario are both on par in terms of your fire abilities, if it has just so happened that you have been called upon for this journey and not Mario, then it is simply not his destiny to complete it, but yours. Besides, I think you'd benefit from this journey far more than you're allowing yourself to realize."

Bowser laughed in a slightly sardonic fashion. "Listen, granny, just because that destiny stuff's relevant to you doesn't mean you get to force it down our throats like feed to pigs. I have much bigger plans and visions to pursue than worrying about *your* problems."

"You overgrown, narcissistic fool!" Daisy barked. "Can't you see that this is encompassing a larger picture? A problem of this magnitude affects all of us! Or are you simply just too selfish to see past your own self-engrossed endeavors? Why don't you tell me what your true goal really is? What are you really trying to accomplish? What are you trying to hide?"

"Sing your sonnet all you want Daisy," Bowser snarled. "Now I'm not your enemy but I damn well can be if you don't stay out of my

business! Likewise, you have plenty more secrets than I – everyone can attest to that, I'm quite sure." He turned to Rosalina. "And you! As 'all-powerful' as you're supposed to be and you can't handle this yourself, 'Elder of the Cosmos?' "

"How about I show you what the underground looks like?" Daisy snapped.

"Oh please, you're gonna through dirt at me?" Bowser mockingly said. "Is that supposed to hurt me or make me have to bathe?"

"Oh, I can do much more than that!" Daisy assured.

"Okay – shiny dirt?"

"That does it!" Daisy yelled as soils began to swirl around her feet. "I hope you have enough fire to burn your way out of what I'm about to put you under!"

Rosalina was unfazed by the escalation. "Truth be-told, Bowser, the legends passed down through the generations become ever more exaggerated as time passes. Although expansive, my power is more limited than you believe. The stars hold the keys to many things and it is within your best interest to take heed of their influence. You are limited by what you don't know, yet you are reluctant to accept information and reality. The reality is, you are necessary for this great task and you must fulfill your duty."

"No thanks," Bowser calmly replied, turning to walk away. "I think I've had enough of this prophetic nonsense for one night. I'm outta here."

"Nonsense?" said Rosalina. "If the shrines are not purified, the corruption will eventually spread past the shrines and out to the whole world, plunging everyone and everything into chaos."

"I doubt it!"

"Your dreams will continue to give you pains."

"I don't think so!"

"Or do you not want to know what happened to your parents?"

Bowser immediately halted to a dead stop. Daisy dispelled the earth elementals that had been gathering.

"What do you mean, granny?" asked Bowser in a much more tame manner.

"Maybe instead of taking out your vendetta on the Toadstool family, you can accept your destiny and learn the truth of what really happened in the distant past," the Elder of the Cosmos suggested.

"You know what happened?" asked the Koopa King. "How can you say something like that?"

"Ah, I see I have your attention now," Rosalina contently said. "No, I do not know exactly what happened. I do know, however, that the stars will reveal to you what you are seeking. This is truth."

Bowser contorted his face in confusion. "Okay now you've just gone insane. How am I supposed to 'read' or 'talk' to a frickin' star?!"

"She doesn't mean literal stars," said Daisy. "She means that you will find out as we *follow* the stars."

Bowser thought this over for a brief moment. Daisy could only wonder what it was that Rosalina and Bowser were talking about, but decided against asking. *I have my own issues to have to deal with,* she thought. *So I know that if there's something I don't want to talk about, then I'm not going to talk about it. Respect for privacy is important.*

"Don't think you won't benefit from this either, Daisy," said Rosalina. "Your own past must be resolved in order for you to truly realize your full potential, and your destiny will take you deep into the territory that you have *avoided* for so long."

Daisy's face turned angrily grim. Just as Bowser had his own issues, whatever they were, Daisy knew that she had her own as well and cringed at the possibility of having to deal with the plights that had caused her so much tribulation in the past. Bowser took notice of the change in Daisy's mood and the mass amount of tension that now

occupied her eyebrows, before saying, "I think I speak for the both of us in saying that we would be glad to undertake this quest."

Daisy made eye contact eye contact with Bowser. Even though they were two completely different beings, right then and there, they both gained a mutual understanding that they had to go on this journey both for the world as well as themselves. Daisy then turned to Rosalina and nodded in confirmation of Bowser's statement. *If this calls for confrontation of my past, I must not and will not run from it,* she thought. *It has to be dealt with. I'm not the type to run away! No, far from it!*

"We of the Comet Observatory are so grateful for your help," said Rosalina. "The adventure that you must embark on is unlike anything which you have experienced so far. Your abilities will be tested, your will tried, your confidence milked, your very lives wagered, but you must not waver from your path. You are about to engage in battle against a foe shrouded in mystery, his motives unknown, and his underlings substantially strong. Please, do not take my words with a grain of salt; the powers that I am sensing emanating from the shrines are unlike anything either of you have come across before. The beings that the Mario Brothers have encountered in their past journeys are all child's play compared to what lies in wait for you. In your current state, it may very well take the two of you combined to even be able to stand-up against one of them! Bowser, Daisy, I sense great determination and courage in both of you, and I ask that you use it all as you will most certainly need it! This great task is not for the faint of heart! And that is also why you have been chosen for this!"

Daisy and Bowser looked at each other and exchanged nods. Neither of them had any intention of backing out now.

"The enemy that you must face is of exceptional power," the Elder of the Cosmos continued. "And as you advance further along down the road to finally facing him, you will develop your own powers as well! He has placed the majority of his forces within the shrines, so be wary when you approach them. You will need *this* to purify the shrines."

At the snap of a finger, a silver mirror made of ancient gemstone

materialized in front of Bowser. The Koopa King grabbed it and noticed the ethereal feel it had to it. He also noticed that the lens did not actually have reflective properties but was just simply a piece of glass...or appeared to be just glass.

"This is the Dimensional Mirror, able to dispel negative energies," said Rosalina. "You must take this to the elemental gemstone of each shrine and aim the lens at the gemstone. Then you will have to blast the elemental energy representative of each shrine at the gemstone through the lens. By blasting through the lens, you charge the elemental energies in a manner that is able to dispel the corrupted forces from both the gemstones and the surrounding area, therein liberating the shrines. As I said earlier, I would expect that this great enemy has placed a guardian in each shrine to make sure that none of them are purified as the elements become more and more dysfunctional, and as the world gets drawn closer and closer to the edge. I do not wish to think what will happen should the corruption continue..."

"Then don't think about it then, and just leave it to us!" Daisy declared.

Rosalina nodded, then pointed into the distance towards the Solidus Mountains. "There. You must begin your journey by heading off towards that mountain range. Just follow the path and trust that fate will put everything into place."

"You keep bringing up this 'destiny' and 'fate' when you fail to realize that we are all making independent decisions here!" Bowser slyly said. "If you're going to get us lost, I'm backtracking and going to go to the real you to give you a whole new understanding of the meaning of 'deep-fried!' "

"It's a deal," Rosalina replied.

Bowser narrowed his eyes. "Why you smart little old-"

"C'mon and let's go before you burn off all your energy before we've even fought a deku shrub," said Daisy.

"Alright, but we should prepare ourselves for this trip before

departing," said the koopa. He then mumbled, "And...sorry, for earlier, Daisy."

"It's fine; we've got much bigger things to focus on! We're a team now!" Daisy proclaimed as she lead the way.

Bowser chuckled to himself, intrigued by Daisy's enthusiasm in the face of a looming apocalypse. *This girl is really something else,* he thought as he followed close behind. *This'll definitely be interesting, but I know that the real reason I am here is to find out the rest of what happened in the past. Then, I can look ahead into the future. You better not be messing with me Rosalina; this is too important to me for you to try and make a joke of. I've gone through too much...*

Rosalina looked on as the princess and Koopa King went to prepare for their journey. *If they should fail in their quest, the world could be destroyed from the chaos of the elements,* thought the Cosmic Queen. *I must trust that fate has chosen the right heroes to save our world. My role is limited, but I will do my best to provide whatever assistance I can. Unfortunately, even my help won't guarantee their victory. Still, I must continue to have faith... because faith is all that we really have in the end.*

Once the two elemental wielders of earth and fire were out of her sight, Rosalina's astral body dispersed. The adventure had begun.

Chapter II

The Journey Begins :

It was sometime after the hour of the wolf – before dawn but still underneath the clear, moonlit sky – when Daisy and Bowser had begun their trek towards the Solidus Mountains. The sun made its way over the landscape as they drew nearer to the their destination. Despite the looming threat of worldwide devastation, the two elemental wielders both kept perfectly calm. Daisy lived for these high-pressure moments, and Bowser acknowledged the mission as less of a chore than he originally thought as time went on. Neither of them downplayed the situation's significance, but Bowser still kept some reservation regarding what they didn't know.

It was not hard to tell the two elemental wielders apart at all. Daisy had an athletically muscular and compact build comparable to a gymnast in contrast to Bowser's heavily bulky musculature, making Bowser literally just over twice Daisy's size. Although his spikes were somewhat reduced from their size in the past, Bowser's shell was as hardened as ever. Daisy was in her default, main earth wielder outfit; a black cap-sleeve shirt and black pants together with low-cut silver boots, black weighted ankle bands and wristbands, a black backpack with silver and orange trim, a silver belt, and a silver headband before they began their journey. Though she liked black, she did consider orange to be her favorite color. Even so, Daisy had high regard for the black and silver color combination that symbolized the earth element and always preferred adhering to the honorable tradition of representing one's own elemental affiliation. Similarly, Bowser had on crimson shoulder strap-pockets and crimson pants with a black utility belt and a crimson du-rag. Just as Daisy displayed the earth emblem across the back of her shirt, Bowser displayed the fire emblem over the center of his du-rag, belt, and shoulder pockets.

"It's not helping us that you're wearing joint weights," said Bowser. "Don't you realize that you've put yourself at a disadvantage with those on?"

"It's helping me that I'm wearing them," Daisy replied. "I feel like the extra pull of gravity helps keep me grounded and helps with control and feel of the earth better. Besides that, I've gotten used to them, so I'm not really slowed down with these on."

"I see; much in the same way that my shell doesn't slow me down," the koopa said. "What do you mean by 'grounded,' though?"

"It helps keep my energy flow closer to the earth so that I have an easier time with focusing and controlling it."

"I'll trust your judgment," said Bowser. He then sarcastically added, "I didn't realize throwing dirt was such a complex action. How much do those weights weigh?"

"Twenty pounds."

"Twenty pounds?" Bowser exclaimed.

"Each," Daisy added.

"Each?!"

"Each. They don't look heavy at all – they look like they're only three pounds each, but it's just because these are ultra dense."

"But you're a damn bantamweight!

"Welterweight."

"What?!"

"I'm pretty lean."

Disbelief briefly took over Bowser's face. Elemental earth energy had already granted Daisy a great amount of endurance and great night vision for dark areas and underground places. Independent of her elemental boost, she was already formidably strong – made even more significant by the fact that she weighed only a hundred forty-five pounds at most, yet also looked twenty pounds lighter. She had been moving without any extra effort despite carrying the additional eighty pounds around. A lithe body like hers that could

pack a punch in an instant made her a force to be reckoned with.

Bowser knew he underestimated Daisy's capabilities, yet reminded himself that he still had the superior endurance. His extra weight and muscle bulk added substantially to his own endurance – even more than the boost a typical earth wielder would get – and he also had some pretty decent speed considering his massive size. All that paired with the resistance to extreme heat his affiliation with fire granted him ensured that he would last long in most situations. And yet, he couldn't help but be impressed by the earth wielder beside him. *A good teammate this so-called 'destiny' provided,* he thought with a low-toned laugh.

"What happened," Daisy murmured. "Did I miss the joke that nobody heard?"

"It's just funny..." Bowser began. "I didn't know you were such a lightning bruiser, Daisy. Unfortunately, that means that you have some glaring weakness *somewhere* . You better hope our opposition doesn't figure out your crippling disability."

"You better hope so too," Daisy confidently replied. "Nobody's perfect."

"Well, I'm just glad that this supposed 'destiny' didn't choose a weakling for me to babysit."

"You now what? That's funny – I was thinking the *exact* same thing."

Bowser paused. "Well played."

The two of them laughed as they continued on their way down the path Rosalina sent them on. They knew nothing about where they were going except that they were en route to the southwestern region of the continent. The Solidus Mountains stretched a few hundred miles across, but Rosalina assured them that the path they would be walking would lead them right to where they needed to go.

In a world where people practiced the skills and tactics of manipulating the very elements around them, Mario was known throughout the lands as one of the most proficient wielders of flame.

While his brother Luigi was not as competent in his skills with the air, he made up for it by being able to manipulate the friction in the air to a degree high enough to spawn lightning and electricity. But it seemed Mario was in a class of his own, known in the past to temporarily adopt other elements as well, albeit with very limited control. He had since abandoned such tactics and stuck to optimizing his fire wielding. Legends were passed down of beings that had control over all the elements as well as their advanced forms, but such beings were widely regarded as myth and grossly exaggerated, if not gods. As well as being almost impossible, it was considered immoral for an elemental wielder to have mastery over more than one element.

The peoples of the world from many walks of life learned to manipulate the elements as an advantage in many things. Domestic affairs, labor forces, technological advances, peace, war; all were taken to a higher level through elemental involvement. Daisy knew that any element being used for evil intentions could be a threat to anybody, and yet here she was, walking alongside Bowser, the King of Koopas who seemed to do nothing but use his flames to wage war against the Mushroom Kingdom. Interestingly enough, this supposedly evil being of the fire that craved senseless violence had not shown any signs of hostility since they started their journey a handful of hours ago. She considered the possibility that Bowser was not the mindless beast that Mario was always clashing with. *No, Bowser had purpose,* she thought *. Meaningful purpose.*

Elemental command was considered a form of martial arts. Many would try to learn the craft but only about half of them would be able to perform even the basic techniques, much less the advanced forms of each element. Daisy was grateful to have made her home in the earth and to be powerful enough to wield its advanced form, crystal. She knew Mario had some very intense and complex fire moves, but she did not recall seeing him use plasma, the advanced form of fire. She glanced at Bowser for a brief second, sure that she had seen him at some point in the past utilize plasma. That contrast alone would only confirm that this mission the two of them were on was in no way a joke. And even if it all truly was a big joke, it would have to be one of the most sickest and cruelest jokes of all time. *I don't know if I'd be laughing at that or not* , she thought as she

looked at her callused hands and smiled. *Master Terran, if you were here right now, I wish you would've been able to see how far I've come* .

"Don't forget," Bowser began. "We benefited from this first shrine being relatively close by, but that just means all the other shrines are that much further away. When we finish our business with this first one, then I'll have a couple of my koopa officers bring us the vehicles."

Daisy nodded. Bowser was capable of being far more tactical than anybody gave him credit for. They had no knowledge of possible Warp Pipes that could provide any form of fast travel between the new areas they would be exploring, so they got a little creative. Before their departure, Bowser had prepared a seven-man, all-terrain, steel cage SUV, the Offroader. Daisy had her Mach Bike she used for the Mushroom Kingdom Grand Prix events attached to the Offroader's roof. Her bike was necessary since the Offroader was the highest capacity vehicle the koopas had available at the time. His koopa engineers were giving the bike off-road modifications as he and Daisy were leaving so that by the time they returned, her bike could keep pace with his vehicle no matter the terrain. That preparation accounted for the quick transport of both themselves and the six others that they would need to complete their mission with. They both knew that they couldn't waste time trying to travel across the continent any other way, and none of Bowser's flying vehicles that could sit more than seven had a respectable amount of speed.

"That's strange," Daisy said after a while.

"What?" asked Bowser.

Daisy looked around. "For mass chaos and disorder, the area around here is surprisingly calm."

She was right. They had just reached a valley from which the Solidus mountain range was visible. It was mid-morning and although the sky looked dirty and cloudy the closer they got to the mountains, everything was quite quaint despite the circumstances of the corruption of the shrines. It was as if the calmness Daisy and

Bowser both possessed reflected onto the environment around them.

"No chaos when there's supposed to be chaos?" asked Bowser. "Sounds like something's wrong to me."

"WOOOOO-WHEEEE! Open your eyes BOY!"

Daisy and Bowser both turned to their left to see an old country man coming into sight. He had some colored flags sticking out of his backpack.

"State your business!" Bowser demanded.

"I'ma local farmer from the nearby village at the base of the mount'ns a half-mile further down south!" the man began. "I'm out scoutin' the surroundin' area to pick out good spots to landscape and expand to! I done seen you peca-luliar lookin' fellurs comin' across the valley. Y'all need to be careful around here! You don't look like you're from these parts."

"We're in search of an elemental shrine that is supposed to be near here," said Daisy.

"But you don't look like you can help us so we'll just be on our way," Bowser cut-in to say.

"Lookee here!" yelled the farmer. "Somebody...or something, has interfered with the great Fire Shrine! Strange things have been happenin' for a while now because of it! Ever since things went crazy up there, the temperature down here has been like a yo-yo! Hot, then cold. Hot, cold. And random sections of the mount'ns here have been catchin' on fire for no reas'n; it's insane!"

"I'm tempted to say you're insane," Bowser joked under his breath.

"No joke brotha!" the farmer shouted. "Take a look in that direction up this'ere mountain pass!"

Daisy and Bowser both turned their heads to see that lined across the mountain tops were fires of various intensities. A faintly visible vortex hovered in the sky up the nearest mountain, creating a break

in the cloudy ceiling. They both shared a look, assuming that the Fire Shrine existed just underneath the ominous sighting overhead.

"The malevolent forces that have invaded the shrines must already be throwing off the balance of the world," said Daisy. "With each shrine corrupted, nature itself is going crazy! But it looks like this disorder originates from the shrines and not just in random spots. That might be why we didn't notice it at first."

"We have to assume that the chaos emanating from the shrines will expand further and further away, covering larger and larger sections of land," Bowser said. "We can't waste anymore time – I think I can already start to see the fires expanding outwards and coming down the slopes. But the really bizarre thing is that the fires are there, and then they momentarily vanish – just to respawn again!"

"I wouldn't go up to dat dere shrine," the farmer warned. "You prolly may be 'spectin to be goin' into a volcano with lav-er and all, but that partic-alar mountain is actually an ee-xtinct volcano, so you don't haveta wurry 'bout no lava shootin' ya in ya behind-quarters! Ya betta be aware though that there's a great beast lurkin' around somewhere up in there!"

"We'll take our chances," Daisy replied.

"Golly, you youngins're something else," said the farmer. "But whatever busi-neese y'all's got up there must be important e-nuff to warrant tangoing with whatever that...that – thing – is. I'll be rootin' for ya though!" The farmer then hummed a folk tune to himself as he marched off.

Bowser sighed. "Mountain people, I swear..."

The two elemental wielders continued a little ways further down the path and started up the extinct volcano. As they went further up the base, the fires near the top continued alternating through a cycle of combustion, wild dances, and vanishing acts. The scene looked as bizarre as it did unsettling.

"So our first stop's the Fire Shrine, huh?" said Bowser. "You know, we still don't know who exactly we're supposed to be going after nor

do we know where the others are that we're supposed to team up with. I feel like this is all a wild arcanine-chase."

"We'll figure it out as we go, Mr. Skeptic," Daisy assured. "Right now our task is purifying the shrines. Luckily for us, the slope here appears to be walkable, and the path looks like it goes all the way to the crater. Let's focus on what lies ahead of that crater, and the details'll come later on."

"I would hope so, or else I'm going to go right to Rosalina and blast-"

Bowser was cut off by a fast moving object that just narrowly escaped his nose and nailed itself into a nearby tree. Both Daisy and Bowser froze in place and turned their attention to where the object had struck, only to see that it had dissolved into a puddle. He and Daisy both turned to see a figure in the distance clad in navy and royal blue staring them down and ready to fight.

"Gee, that was so nice. I always wanted a piercing!" Bowser shouted at the blue figure. "Too bad you missed! Please try again later!"

"Sorry, I don't hand out business cards," the blue-clothed figure replied. "We'll have to take care of your body art now while the offer is still available. Even if you chose to decline, you will not continue up this path!"

"And why is that?" asked Bowser.

"I cannot allow you people to continue with your corruption of our reality!" came the figure's answer.

"What?" Bowser asked under his breath.

The figure moved closer into view. It was a brown-haired, blue-eyed man with an ornamental knee-low royal blue tunic that depicted ancient water markings along its trim, complete with a light set of golden armor across the chest and hips and a navy blue undershirt. His hair was long and straight, and the water symbol was visible on both sides of his navy blue pants. He carried twin daggers in a sheath in the side of his hip armor and while he was larger than Daisy, he lacked the definition and hardness of the earth wielder.

"Stand down, twisted fiends, or I will force you down into critical depth," the man warned.

"He must think we're the ones responsible for nature's corruption," said Daisy.

"Way to state the obvious, princess of earth," replied Bowser. He directed his attention toward the water wielder. "Hey! Unless you're blind, you should know that there is nothing but mountain, valley, and forest for miles around, so drowning us is just out of the question."

With quickness, the man in blue conjured a large wall of water and fired it at Bowser and Daisy. The blast made contact with them both, forcefully knocking them over.

"There, right on the ground where you belong," the man in blue said with a content smile.

"Wipe that smirk off your face if you know what's good for you!" shouted Daisy. She ripped a chunk of earth out of the ground and hurled it while Bowser let lose a breath of intense flames to propel the mass even faster.

It happened so fast – there wasn't even time to blink. The man in blue moved ever so slightly out of the way of the flaming mass of minerals in a full twist that ended in a string of water bullets shot at Daisy with sound-breaking speed that caught her in the arm. At the same time, a water cyclone whirled towards Bowser, but it was slow enough for the koopa to counter with a well-timed fireball.

The earth wielder grunted in surprisingly intense pain. "Damn, who knew water could be so vicious," she said to herself. "I was expecting a blunt hit, not a bunch of skin-breaking stabs."

"You're faster than me and you couldn't dodge that?" Bowser asked.

"What do you want me to do?" Daisy responded. "It was coming at the speed of sound so it was essentially point-blank range! I'm not Sonic the Hedgehog!"

"I will not allow your kind to come here and ruin our world with your

vile ways!" The man in blue proclaimed.

"Our kind?" said a surprised Daisy, trying to ignore the piercing pain in her left arm. "We're trying to prevent the world from being ruined!"

"LIAR!" he shouted back. Almost like a flick of a switch, the air began to feel intensely heavy as moisture from the surrounding areas gathered in their location. Rain poured from the clouds overhead, becoming more and more heavy until Bowser and Daisy's vision became obstructed. Calling upon extra power, Daisy summoned some of the earth to form a dome around her and Bowser and then hardened it into crystal. Doing so prevented the dome from being reduced to mud by the torrential downpour.

Daisy looked at the storm in awe. "I can't see a thing with this dense rain! His mastery with water is truly extraordinary... He's not going to believe us is he?"

"No. He won't," muttered Bowser. "Unless..." He reached into one of his shoulder pouches and pulled out the Dimensional Mirror. He turned towards the man in blue and demanded, "Call off this rain! We are not trying to destroy any world!"

The man slowed the rain down to a halt. "Prove it. Or die for lying."

Daisy dispelled the crystal barrier as Bowser held up the Dimensional Mirror by the handle. "You see this?" the Koopa King condescendingly shouted. "We need to take this up that mountain and fix whatever the hell happened to cause all these random fires across the mountain range before they start spreading down and outward."

The man in blue gasped. "That mirror," he began. "I've seen it before... In my dreams..." He dropped his guard and marched towards Daisy and Bowser. "Lately, I've been having recurring images at night where I'm drowned and crushed in an ocean that had risen and engulfed an entire city. That city was so beautiful and well built...and so densely populated. I saw all of them drown and perish, but I couldn't do anything at all because the water wasn't answering to me no matter what I did." He paused and sighed before continuing. "Then I saw that mirror in my dreams. It had a

divine aura emanating from it and it dispelled the great flood by returning the ocean back to its proper height."

Bowser and Daisy shared a look, both realizing at that moment that this man was one of the elemental wielders they would need for their quest. He had demonstrated exceptional skill and elemental control compared to them, and the range of his elemental influence was impressive, but he otherwise didn't seem to have any other special traits to his style that were above average.

"I apologize," the man said. "I did not mean to mistake you for enemies. I guess the past several restless nights have made me a bit anxious. I didn't think anyone else would be heading in the direction of one of the shrines unless they were up to no good, and I just so happened to be heading to the Fire Shrine in time to see you two moving towards it. Once again, I apologize. I am Warra, a water wielder. Please excuse my hostility."

"Excused," said Daisy, grimacing.

"Please, allow me," begged Warra as he reached for a bottle strapped to the back of his hip armor. He undid the top and allowed the water from inside the bottle to flow onto Daisy's arm, covering it from all angles. He let the water stay like that for a few moments before pulling the water away, making the mass spin in midair with immensely fast rotation, and withdrawing all the water back into the bottle.

"This is a healing water I carry around," said the water wielder. "By spinning the water at near-sonic speeds I am able to re-sterilize it for later use. Although with each use, it becomes less and less effective as some of its special properties are absorbed into each injury it assists in healing."

"Looks more efficient than a first aid kit," said Bowser.

"Feels better than one too," added Daisy.

Warra nodded. "It works as an anesthetic and helps to seal off any significant wounds so that the healing process can occur more quickly and efficiently."

"Wow, thanks," said Daisy, smiling.

"I am Bowser, King of Koopas," the fire wielder announced before turning to his comrade. He quickly added, "And this slowpoke is Daisy."

"Nice to meet you," said Warra. "You are both heading to the Fire Shrine to purify it?"

"Yes, we are," Bowser replied.

"Then I must come along, no more questions asked," Warra avowed. "I was visited in my dreams by a woman of the stars who told me to come here to help in the reversal of the elements' corruption and I intend to do so. Let's move forward."

That's odd , Bowser thought. *I thought Rosalina said she wasn't involved in any of our dreams...*

The three elemental wielders proceeded to make their way up the mountain pass to the crater of the volcano. There, the Fire Shrine awaited them. The vortex above the crater expanded as numerous streaks of fire had begun to jut all through the air as if they were bolts of lightning, and the sky tinted to a pale, murky pink.

Chapter III

To the Fire Shrine :

"You know why I like flowers so much?" asked Daisy. "Because they're alive. They come out of the ground, blossom, and after that, they're so vibrant and pretty and alive."

"I would expect that considering you are a person of the earth," said Warra.

"They're just so alive..." Daisy continued. "They just want to pull themselves free from the ground and do back flips, but they know that in order to stay alive, they must draw from the earth. So they have to stay grounded. They crave independence but they don't know how to get it."

I wonder if perhaps you are like a flower too, Daisy , Bowser thought to himself. *Maybe that's your weakness. You may be strong, fast, and agile; that much I'm not denying, but how well can you transfer that from the ground to the air?*

Bowser turned to Warra . *I'm sure you will quickly fall apart in the desert. Trying to conjure water in a place like that would require too much energy; substantially more than in a more moderate climate. That's because if you try to create some of your element in a place devoid of it, you have to expend extra energy not only to use your element in a disadvantaged environment, but because you have to manipulate the raw matter and molecules in the way that will produce your element...and the time it would take to be able to do all that would be so long that you might be better off abandoning the element altogether.*

The Koopa King averted his gaze back to the upcoming crater. *It all works in tandem to create balance and natural order. On a neutral field, no elements are at an advantage. On the other hand, elements offset each other in a way so that either element can have an advantage over another depending upon the location. Fire and ice*

clash, air and earth clash, water and stone clash, and light and shadow clash. That may turn out to be a factor in how we go about liberating these shrines...

"I'm from a family of servants and guards to the rulers of my homeland," said Warra. "Our duties did include tending to the gardens. Everyone was aware of the flower's and other plant's needs and wants and took good care of them to make sure they reached their full potential for growth."

Daisy sighed. "Flowers have so much potential, but they're so often overlooked, unappreciated...undervalued..."

The trio approached the crater as flames shot across overhead, but the crater itself was dry just as the farmer said it would be. In fact, the whole crater itself was the Fire Shrine! It was a ceiling-less red, yellow, and beige complex that resembled a temple more than anything else. A large ceremonial structure stood in the center of it all.

"That must be where we have to go," said Warra.

"It is..." Bowser said in awe. "I'm not sure, I have no idea how...but, I can feel the elemental gemstone's presence!"

"Then we go there," confirmed Daisy.

The three fighters went through the lone gate in front of them, leading to a long downwards staircase that fed into the crater. From the outer area of the complex, they made their way through the corridors lined with fire symbols and ancient artworks depicting flames, eventually reaching the final door that would lead to the central room they saw from overhead.

"There's no telling how old this place must be," said Warra.

"And that means this volcano is that much older," added Bowser.

"I think we can safely say nobody would be willing to build a structure of this magnitude underneath a bed of lava," Daisy said.

"Would it be a bed of lava or a bed of magma if it's in the crater?"

asked Warra.

"Let's just open the door!" Bowser insisted with haste. However, the door itself appeared to be locked shut.

"Should we blast it?" suggested Daisy. "I say screw finding a key wherever it may be."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea," said Warra. "And judging by the markings on this door and the vent up at the top of it, that may be exactly what we need to do." He turned to Bowser. "But since this is the Fire Shrine, I believe that you were meant to do the honors."

"Gladly," Bowser replied. With a large inhale, Bowser let loose a concentrated stream of flames up through the vent. Within moments, the fire symbol on the door began to glow with a golden hue and the door split down the middle to swing open. The three elemental wielders walked in, prepared for battle but completely unaware of what they would encounter.

The main room was spacious and grand, with a large tunnel off to the far right. The central ceremonial structure did not lack the ornamental and ritualistic decorations of the rest of the shrine. Upon the pedestal was the elemental Fire Gemstone, in plane sight and surprisingly, unguarded.

"Watch out! Before the air attacks us!" Bowser joked.

"I don't understand; there was supposed to be a guardian here," Daisy wondered aloud.

"Perhaps we can just perform the purification and then leave?" suggested Warra. "If we don't have to fight anyone or anything, then why look for a fight?"

"No," Daisy sternly said. "We have to make sure we take care of that guardian before anything else happens. If we leave and that guardian is still somewhere around here, then the shrine will fall again, and we can't afford to backtrack."

"You were ready to fight Daisy and I a little while ago and now you don't want to fight?" asked Bowser. "Hypocrisy abounds..."

"Hey, at the time I thought it was necessary," said Warra. "If I don't have to fight, then I'd prefer not to."

"Well let's do it then and get out of here," the Koopa King said as he tossed the Dimensional Mirror over to Warra and made his way towards the Fire Gemstone.

Suddenly, the ground started to shake. All attention was drawn towards the tunnel on the right as a glow and a thundering noise emitted from its opening. What emerged was what looked like a cross between a rhinoceros, a wild ram, a bull, and a skeleton-like fiend from a horrible nightmare. Its magnificence shot up to eleven when its body that was already four times the size of Bowser's became engulfed in fire. The beast let loose an ear-splitting shriek and readied itself into an offensive stance.

"Man, I thought Wario was ugly," commented Bowser.

"This is the Flame Behemoth," Warra said in awe. "The lady of the cosmos had revealed to me that we would encounter this beast somewhere along the way."

"Rosalina right?" Daisy asked.

"I believe so," replied the water wielder. "In one of my dreams, the last one I had before I came here, she appeared to me and explained what would be waiting here for us."

"I've got words her when we get back then," said Bowser. "But right now I think we need to deal with the immediate situation."

The Flame Behemoth let loose another shriek, much more blood-curdling than the last. Sparks flew from its body as fire continued flaring from it.

"Stand back; I call ownership of the defeat of this eldritch abomination," declared Bowser. Warra and Daisy both deferred and allowed the Koopa King to step forward.

The Flame Behemoth stood on all fours. Bowser wasted no time and charged towards the great beast to try and land the first hit. His speed was quite surprising considering his size and weight, and it

appeared that as he shifted around the the shrine center, the beast lost track of his movements until the koopa was able to cut behind it and deliver a crushing kick to its rear right leg. The beast let loose a roar and stomped its front leg of the opposite side into the crater ground, kicking up even more fire as it did so. Bowser was minimally effected by the intense amount of flames but did decide to withdraw back from the beast once he saw that it caught sight of him.

Angered, the behemoth rolled itself up into a ball and propelled itself around the arena. Daisy and Warra both quickly leapt and backtracked off to the side while Bowser decided to try and draw the beast's attention towards the center. The beast rolled around in circles as Bowser sidestepped out of the way of each revolution. The koopa then prepared himself for his Whirling Fortress technique as the giant rolling fireball began to make its way around again. Once in his line of sight, Bowser launched himself directly at the Flame Behemoth and locked onto it. The two rotations clashed against each other for supremacy, although it looked as if Bowser just made sure to match his opponent's speed. He could feel the heat of the beast's fire, but his natural resistance gave him some protection against it. This didn't help the fact that his opponent's spinning was practically blowing its flames right at him, but he pressed onwards. *If the other two were fighting right now, they'd have been burnt to a cinder already* , he thought.

Soon, the clash eventually came to a halt as the spinning forces from each party canceled each other out and knocked both beings backwards through the air. The fire creature reeled on its front legs and skidded to a halt. Bowser dug his weight into the ground to stop him from slamming into the wall.

Now Bowser got down on all fours, lowering his head to near ground level. He gathered a massive amount of flame elementals into his mouth and let loose a continuous stream of fire at the monster. The blast made direct contact but wasn't appearing to be doing any sort of harm to the creature.

"What's he doing?" Daisy asked. "Doesn't he know that if that beast is actively able to light itself on fire then a fire-based attack is not going to work?"

"I don't think he's trying to burn that thing down," said Warra.

Bowser sent more energy into his beam, intensifying its output. The attack actually started to push back the beast. The Flame Behemoth eventually lost its footing and got thrown back into the wall. Bowser canceled the beam and charged forward, unleashing a barrage of punches at the collapsed beast once he got close. The beast shrieked once more and let loose a pulse of fire that pushed back the attacking koopa and sent him tumbling backwards. Bowser looked up to see the beast charging towards him, but was not able to move quick enough. He took a heavy kick to the torso that sent him to the side of the room. The beast yielded any potential follow-up assault. Bowser got himself up and looked none the worse from the last attack.

"His endurance is truly remarkable," commented Warra. "He took a direct hit like that from a creature of that magnitude with minimal damage."

Bowser switched to a defensive stance and waited for a move from his opponent. The monster did not budge at first, instead opting to cultivate its flames. A few moments more passed until finally, the beast charged towards Bowser again. He sidestepped away from the creature with what little clearance was given and jumped backwards a handful of steps. The creature turned around and let loose a breath of fire aimed at Bowser, but he was able to deflect it up into the air with his shell. That burst of fire collided with one of the flame streaks in the sky, creating a surreal reaction overhead. The beast continued launching breaths of fire at Bowser that the koopa kept deflecting upwards with his shell. Amazingly, the Flame Behemoth did not seem to be losing any energy or showing any signs of fatigue.

Suddenly, the blasts stopped. Bowser turned and looked around his shell only to find that the beast was already right on top of him. The King of Koopas did not have time to move but managed to put his hands up to catch the creature. The Flame Behemoth forced its weight down on him, testing Bowser's strength.

"Bowser's getting crushed!" exclaimed Daisy. "We have to jump in now."

"Hold on," Warra replied. "Let's see what he's going to do here."

Bowser could feel his body taking all the pressure and heat from the great beast's body. If he didn't do anything quickly enough, he was going to be flattened.

"I don't think he's going to be able to do anything," said Daisy, charging some seismic energy in her fist. "He needs a rescue!"

"WAIT!" Bowser yelled. "I've got this under control! Stay out of this!"

"What's this?" Warra mumbled in question.

The monster continued to force its weight down on Bowser, but the koopa remained focused on something other than the beast on top of him...

"His hands!" Warra exclaimed. Bowser's hands were glowing with an intense white and orange hue. "That can't be fire – what is that?"

Daisy looked in amazement, dispelling her gathered energies. "It's plasma..."

A wave of plasma struck the Flame Behemoth and lifted it up into the air, its power too much for the beast to handle. Bowser stood up and continued firing the plasma wave for a few extra seconds before cutting it off. The beast roared as it flew backwards, the plasma having quelled most of its flames.

"Very nice move, Bowser," said Warra. "But did you *intentionally* let that beast get that up close and personal on you?"

"Just to make sure it was at a close enough range for a certain, critical hit," Bowser replied. "Plasma is what's created when you're able to super-heat fire to an extremely high temperature and then encase it around a single molecule. Utilizing plasma takes a lot of focus and energy; energy that cannot be wasted. It was a bit of a gamble, but it paid off." He turned his head to see the beast returning to its feet, growling and trembling. *But it still withstood the plasma* , Bowser thought. *Incredible...*

Daisy looked at the angered monster. "You might want to make your

move now Bowser while you have the opportunity!"

The Flame Behemoth emitted yet another one of its shrieks. Bowser conjured a highly-charged fireball in his mouth and shot it directly at the ground, creating a big cloud of debris and smoke. When everything settled, the koopa was nowhere to be seen.

"Ingenious," Warra said as if he had foresight. Daisy looked somewhat puzzled – nothing had happened to warrant such a remark. The Flame Behemoth was completely unaware of the koopa's whereabouts and continued to peer around the grand room in confusion.

Then *it* happened. Down came the Koopa King from out of the sky in an inverted Whirling Fortress, his shell aimed towards the fiery monster. He came too fast for the weakened beast to react, successfully slamming into its spine and appearing to shatter the lumbar and thoracic columns. Now without support, the creature collapsed again. This time however, it appeared to be for the last time.

"He shot himself into the air with a charged fireball, knowing that he had to make a non-fire related attack to make his offense effective," Warra said as Bowser jumped back from the flaming creature. It staggered trying to get up but was crippled by the attack. Its injury completely wrecked its central nervous system, causing it to lose control of itself. The fires around the beast returned and intensified even more and looked to be exceeding what it could actually tolerate. Not only that, but the flames seemed to be flowing inwards rather than radiating outwards as they did for much of the battle.

The Flame Behemoth let out a shriek far more mind-numbing than any of its previous ones as its own fire began to engulf itself. The creature burned itself up, shrieking all the way to the slow bitter end. After several moments, it stopped moving. Soon, the fire ceased burning. The Flame Behemoth silenced forever, all that remained was a huge pile of ashes and bones.

"Very impressive," said Warra. "I like your tactics."

"And Rosalina said we needed two people to take down these

things!" Bowser haughtily echoed. "C'mon, Warra; get that mirror ready."

Bowser and Warra walked towards the Fire Gemstone and stopped about twelve feet away from it. With Warra holding the Dimensional Mirror, Bowser let loose a continuous beam of fire from his hand. The flames gained a sacred glow as they passed through the mirror lens, and as they struck the gemstone, they began the cleansing process of the nature of fire. The sky overhead cleared as the flames ceased their restless aerial tantrum and the mountain wildfires slowly burned themselves out. Bowser felt a sensation of security and righteousness fill his body as the fire element was restored to order and balance.

"I believe that did it," said the Koopa King.

"I'd hate to see what would've happened to this land if we had delayed our trek," said Warra.

"And I'd hate to see what will happen to the other lands if we delay our trek now," added Daisy.

"I'm pretty certain there's nothing else we need to do while we're here," said Bowser. "Let's leave this sacred place in peace."

"Great work, you guys," said Daisy in honorable praise.

The three made their way back out through the corridors of the Fire Shrine and up the stair-lined crater back outside. They took one last look at the structure before turning their attention up and outwards to the beyond. Seven shrines remained, and five other elemental wielders were out there somewhere.

"So where to next?" asked Warra.

Just then, Daisy gasped in urgent desperation. "Oh man! This is crazy! I'm sensing an insane power just down the slope!"

Bowser and Warra both tried to tune themselves in to the energy being emitted from their surroundings. Daisy was not lying. The trio rushed down the slope to see a figure waiting at the bottom of the mountains. They leapt and dove down the ledges to hasten their

descent, though the figure did not seem to be in any hurry to leave. They reached the base of the mountain range in record time, the new figure just yards away.

There he was; a man covered in navy blue robes with bronze trim whose face was shrouded by a dark blue hood. His bronze shoulder plates accented the same-colored spikes in the shape of blades that protruded from his back as if they were wings. His essence gave off a cryptic, ominous vibe.

When the figure spoke, his voice was both deep and soft at the same time. "I see Rosalina was able to interfere with your dream spell."

"So you were the one behind my dream of the flood?" asked Warra.

The figure was motionless and did not hesitate with his words. "I was behind all of the dreams. Not intentionally... But it appeared to be a consequence of my actions with the elements...as if a warning sign was sent to you that something was...off. It is said in the ancient scriptures that during times when nature itself was in distress, the fated ones of that generation would receive alarms in visions during the night. So in any case, I knew I would have resistance against my efforts."

"Who are you?" Daisy softly demanded in wonder.

"Come to the Stone Shrine." the figure answered. "Head northeast from here to the south-central area of this continent. You must prove you are worth my time. Then, if you are worthy enough, if you insist on putting yourself headfirst into the path of an unstoppable storm, if you feel your unimpressive powers can stand against and rival a staggering titan of divinity...then I may tell you who I am. If you die, then your execution is solely on your own hands and you have no one to blame but yourselves for thinking you could handle something that deep down you knew you could not." Without any movement or warning, the figure evaporated into thin air.

"Did he just teleport?!" Bowser asked in astonishment.

"I believe he did," Warra said with worry. "And I believe that is the

great enemy that we must defeat."

"His energy signature..." Daisy sputtered with a stern face. "I've never felt anything like it... We should get moving to the Stone Shrine at once."

"Unacceptable," said Warra. "We must look for the other elemental wielders and combine our efforts if we are to have a chance in taking down that fiendish being. If I was able to pierce through your arm, just think what he could do! Let's just go to a different shrine – we haven't even encountered the needed stone wielder yet."

"Judging by what he said, that's the closest one!" Daisy argued. "Rosalina said to trust in the stars; to trust in fate and destiny. So I will trust that we will run into the stone wielder we need before we get there, no questions asked."

"I agree with Daisy," said Bowser. "We don't have the time or luxury of picking and choosing which shrine to go to first and making a big connect-the-dots map out of the continent. On top of that, this seems to be the only way of figuring out the who, what, when, where, why, and how of this whole situation. We'll head back to my palace for the night and prepare to set out for the Stone Shrine tomorrow morning."

"I still don't think it's a good idea," Warra muttered. "It all sounds like a big trap."

"Well according to you, he could wipe us all out by blinking his eyelashes," Bowser remarked. "So based on your logic there, why would he even need a trap?"

"We have to take the chance," Daisy urged. "C'mon, Warra."

Warra paused for a moment, before saying, "Alright. I'll trust your judgment."

"That's more like it," said Bowser. "Now let's get going before we run into that mountain farmer again."

The trio made their way through the valley to the path that led back to the Mushroom Kingdom. They traveled underneath the afternoon

sun that was now high in the partly cloudy blue sky.

Chapter IV

Hour of the Wolf :

The evening hours dimmed the sky as Bowser, Daisy, and Warra made their way into The Forest Meadow. As they moved towards the center, an astral clone of Rosalina appeared in front of them just as before. Warra bowed in front of the image of the cosmic being, but Bowser was not so generous.

"Hey! What's the big idea?!" Bowser shouted. "You said you had nothing to do with anyone's dreams! And yet Warra here says that you came to him in one of his!"

"I was aware and surprised that you were able to take down the Flame Behemoth by yourself, Bowser," said Rosalina.

"You're the one that wanted to underestimate me," Bowser replied. "Now tell us what's up!"

"I did not cause any dreams of yours," Rosalina confirmed. "However, I felt the need to intervene in some of those dreams. I did not interfere with yours or Daisy's because you two knew of my existence already, and would therefore seek me out. The other six elemental wielders, including Warra, did not know me. Because of this, I felt the need to visit them in their slumber and offer my aide to them. I have already visited Warra, but I will be visiting the others in their dreams tonight and relay to them what happened today so that they may join you as soon as possible. We can be certain that they are experiencing the same nightmares that you have experienced; the nightmares of your elements turning against you."

"I am grateful for your aide, lady of the cosmos," said Warra.

"We are all grateful," added Daisy. "We were discussing our trip to the Stone Shrine earlier and how we would need the stone wielder to be with us."

"I see," said Rosalina. "Then I will have to visit that person first.

Remember that I will be watching from above. So whatever happens, whatever information you figure out, I will know as well. From here on out, should we need to communicate, I will provide an astral clone to speak through wherever you are at that moment when necessary, as the rest of your mission will take you on a grand tour of the continent and you will not be able to return to the area here until your task has been completed. The Stone Shrine is just north of here, but the rest of the shrines are far away."

"This shrine stuff feels like some sort of video game," muttered Bowser.

"If this was a game, this would have to be one of the most demented ever made," Daisy remarked.

"I assure you this is far from being a game," said Rosalina. "I also see you encountered our enemy on the way back."

"Yes," replied Bowser. "And he is a very formidable adversary at that. The magnitude of his energy signature is unreal."

"Avoid conflict with him if you can," Rosalina advised. "You are not able to even consider rivaling him in your current states."

"We'll try not to engage," said Warra.

"Before you leave, I have some information that may be of interest," said Rosalina. "The area the Stone Shrine is in has become very harsh and desolate. Exercise caution."

"Why? What happened there?" asked Bowser.

"Our enemy has created a dimensional rift there," Rosalina said.

Varying degrees of shock appeared Daisy's, Bowser's, and Warra's faces. Dimensional portals were not unheard of, and actually was a special ability among some beings, but an entire dimensional rift was not only deemed immoral, but nearly impossible as well.

"That's just insane..." said Daisy, her tone grim.

Rosalina went on. "The entire south-central region of the continent

has been warped by this rift. In addition, the corruption of the stone element has advanced dramatically. The Stone Shrine still remains, unchanged, but its resting place, the mountainous Abnoba Desert, has become a cascading wasteland of distorted platforms, some of which seem to defy the law of gravity. However, the dimensional rift seems to have prevented the effects from radiating outwards past that region. I cannot explain this."

"Some things you just can't," Warra replied.

"Remember what we discussed here," said the Elder of the Cosmos. "I must now leave you and attend to other affairs. I wish you luck on your journey, all three of you. And I will be sure to spread this information around to the other fated ones."

"Rosalina, wait!" Daisy quickly called out.

"Yes?" Rosalina asked.

"I was wondering about last night..." Daisy said. "Before we left to get ready to go to the Fire Shrine, you referred to me as, 'Earthen Spirit.' Why was that? What did that mean?"

"And you referred to me as 'Flame Titan!'" Bowser added.

Rosalina smiled, saying, "That's something you will figure out and realize for yourself as you progress throughout your journey." As soon as she finished her statement, her astral clone dissipated.

"Let's return to my palace," said Bowser. "I'm getting hungry, and we need rest for tomorrow."

"Yeah, let's eat!" the earth wielder agreed. "You're coming along, right Warra?"

"I'd be glad to," the water wielder answered. "I'm very grateful for the hospitality."

"Don't mention it," the fire wielder responded. "I don't have company over too often."

The moonlit sky vibrantly projected a serene nightly glow on Bowser's palace. Standing in the outskirts of the Mushroom Kingdom, the four-story building had a very regal appearance to it with a new age feel mixed in. Almost every animal in the area was deep in slumber.

The wind lightly blew outside, but inside, Daisy still could not sleep. The same prophetic nightmares plagued her, but a new feature had made its way into her dreams – Someone that she didn't want to see found his way into her sleep. This realization had upset her greatly to the point where anger kept her from getting her nightly rest. *Maybe I'm just an angry soul* , she thought. *Truth be told, I haven't had much to not be angry about* .

The constant tossing and turning in the bed irritated her further, and her arm still felt ginger from earlier in the day. As the minutes passed she became evermore restless. Rarely are her eyebrows not seen arched or furrowed, and now was no exception. At times she couldn't figure out if she was asleep or awake, and once wondered whether she was dead or alive. The palace was *deafeningly silent* .

Daisy decided to get up out of the bed for just a little bit. *I need as much sleep as possible for the upcoming trials that lie ahead* , she thought. *But there's no use frustrating myself from being too frustrated to go to sleep. That's nothing but a self-fulfilling prophecy.*

She walked out of the guest room she was in and stealthily strolled through the hallways and down a couple flights of stairs. Her night vision let her see without turning on any lights and waking anybody up as she made her way to the back of the palace and out the door. She stepped outside onto a large, tile-floored patio illuminated by the lunar light and the sporadic night torches from the palace walls, all giving way to a staircase that led into a large garden maze with a water fountain in the center. The whole patio was lined with gray railings, and to the right, Bowser was leaning over one, looking off into the distance.

"The hour of the wolf..." Bowser mumbled, sensing that Daisy was behind him. "The hour when the troubles of the spirit are in full force and you are forced to confront them, unable to retreat back into dreamland..."

"So that you can be brutalized by your own element?" the earth wielder asked.

"No. I didn't have any dreams about fires," the koopa responded. "And I don't think I will since we dealt with the Fire Shrine earlier."

"Then why aren't you asleep?"

"Why aren't you asleep," Bowser replied flatly.

"Too much on my mind," answered Daisy.

"Too much on mine," said Bowser.

Daisy then thought back to Rosalina and Bowser's exchange the day before, then realized what must have been weighing on Bowser. "I don't know the how or why of your rivalry with Mario and your hatred with the Toadstool family," she began. "Come to think of it, I don't know much about you at all, but I can tell that you must've gone through a lot to want to wage battle after battle against the Mushroom Kingdom. So I can also tell that you're not the villain everyone of the kingdom makes you out to be. You're just misunderstood."

Bowser did not respond.

"You have reason for it all, don't you?" asked the earth wielder. "I want to know."

"Why?" the koopa asked. "So you can mold some perception of me?"

"My perception of everyone and everything," came the response.

Bowser paused for a moment, and then sighed. "Even if I did tell you, then what? What would you do with the information? What do you hope to gain from it?"

"Understanding," was Daisy's solid and true response.

Bowser made another deep breath before he spoke. "We koopas were a peacefully thriving nation who worked in harmony with the

surrounding races, inhabiting the land that is now the mushroom kingdom. Everything was as it was supposed to be..." his voice trailed off before picking back up again. "...Until the Toadstool family invaded our land and attacked."

"Peach's family?" Daisy asked, dumbfounded. "But why?"

"They wanted our land for its location in relation to the surrounding nations and the sea south of here, as well as the bountiful resources that we were graced with. And when they saw us, they mistook our appearances as evil and threatening to their existence...so they wiped out ours in response."

Bowser's tone grew grim and heavy. "Koopa after koopa was eliminated in an all-out offensive. Their weaponry and technology were unlike anything we had ever seen... We had no response. The princess, Peach, a simple tween at the time was the one in charge of the patrol squadron that infiltrated the citadel where my parents and I resided in times of distress. I, roughly the same age as her, and the heir to the throne, watched my parents get cut down right in front of me. An overhead explosion had given me a chance to take cover and escape from their sight. The last thing I remember was hearing the demented laugh of one of the soldiers while watching my parents get beaten to near death, chained, and taken away in cages as if they were slaves or circus animals. That princess looked on with the best poker face you would have ever witnessed. They assumed I was dead, crushed by debris, so they left. I never saw or heard of or from my parents again."

The koopa paused for just a moment. "But I remembered that woman's face and the name 'Toadstool.' "

Daisy could not remove the dour expression from her face. It was a gruesome story, but she did not doubt its truth. There was nothing but truth in his voice.

Bowser went on talking. "Our bountiful kingdom was laid to waste. Not even our ruins were sparred. Our numbers are now but a fraction of what they once were thanks to them. Us survivors and our affiliates were exiled to the outskirts and wasteland territories outside of the kingdom's boundaries." His voice choked in emotional

agony for a brief moment. "The Mushroom Kingdom has masqueraded itself, building up an image of a clean and utopian nation of pure values, but its current status was achieved through war and massacre – Tell me what is honorable about that!"

Daisy had no response, allowing Bowser to get out all he had to say.

"As a result, I have grown bitter of humankind, especially towards the Toadstool monarchy where all my hatred is directed. How could anyone think that my actions towards that kingdom are senseless and meaningless? Only humans would destroy and conquer for no other reason than their personal gain. But no, I am seen as the villain by all those that aren't koopas. I only wish to bring about justice and return honor to the Koopa name! I only wish to restore the prosperity and peace that was stripped away when those beings came and so ungracefully slaughtered the innocent that were my people!"

Daisy remained motionless and silent. It was definitely a lot to have to take in, but none of Bowser's words were lost on her.

"If Rosalina is indeed correct, then on this journey, I may be able to find out what happened to my parents. But as far as the genocide of my people..." Bowser's eyes glared at Daisy with a fierce and shining passion. "I carry the hatred of an entire clan and the burden of revenge – it's just simply something you couldn't possibly understand!"

Daisy lowered her eyes, and said in a cool, somber voice, "Oh, I understand completely..."

"A bold declaration," the Koopa King responded.

Daisy took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "It's not bold at all. You see, I try to be happy and cheery and all that, but it's really hard sometimes. I'm really mad, really bitter, about a lot of things."

"Is that so?" asked Bowser. "Oh this I've got to hear."

Daisy reopened her eyes but her voice became much more depressive. "Since I was a kid, my father has been the King of

Sarasaland. I doubt you've heard of it, but it's a nation built in the heart of a great forest in the far east of the world. When I was a child, my mother told me that I was born with a great amount of natural energy that was far more substantial than the greatest warrior in the Sarasaland. But at that age, I didn't know how to use it. My mother didn't want me to use it. As the years went on, I would slowly learn, but my mother looked at me as if my power was more of a nuisance and a curse than a blessing. She wanted me to be a princess, to involve myself in the political affairs her and my father were always in...but...I never wanted that." She sighed. "In the end, it didn't matter what I wanted because my father would always force it upon me anyways, and my mother always went along with whatever *he* said."

The rasp in Daisy's voice increased in indignation as she went on. "About five years ago or so, our kingdom was encountered by some race of alien beings. The alien leader, Tatanga, demanded that my father surrender all resources and wealth to the aliens or they would kill him and raid the kingdom themselves. My father however, was stubborn and did not want to comply to any of the terms. Instead, I was given away to the aliens to be used as a type of nuclear reactor - to be used as nothing more but a resource to harvest energy from. My mother did nothing to change the situation. She was always on his side..."

A small gust of wind cut through the air. It seemed that as Daisy said more, she became increasingly angered.

"My earth teacher, Master Terran, had taught me most of what I know in regards to my handling of earth. My mother objected to his presence when she learned that he was teaching me and ordered him to be banished from the kingdom, but if it wasn't for him...who knows where I'd be right now..."

Daisy's tone suddenly lit up."Who would think, that a man would sell his only child just to save himself?!" She clenched her fist. "Why should I trust anyone if I cannot even trust my own parents?!"

A wide-eyed Bowser looked on at the earth wielder. Yet another gust blew through in between her words, coinciding with a shift in Daisy's tone. "I am grateful for Mario's aide against Tatanga. I think

I'm actually grateful for having left with Tatanga in the first place, because I was then finally able to get away from my parents. My goal after that was to take advantage of my natural blessing of energy and become as strong as I possibly could be so that I would be dependent upon no one. I now strive to be the very best that I can be so that I can escape from the shadow of my father and emerge as a woman with exemplary power. Yeah, you know what – I am distant, and I am aloof, and I have kept a lot to myself, but it's to make sure that I can work on my skills and hone my athletic abilities the way *I* always intended to! I will not be controlled and treated like some mindless puppet the way he treated me! As far as I'm concerned, I HAD NO FATHER!" Her voice echoed outwards as her eyes started to shine."So you see, I am well aware of what mankind is capable of, which is why I am not surprised by your story one bit!"

Bowser did not say anything, but continued to listen. Daisy had all the right in the world to vent.

"I don't believe your revenge is right, but I will not object to your decisions," Daisy firmly stated. "I am in no position to say anything. But somewhere out there, your parents may be wandering about, and I believe that at least if only for the time being, you should heed Rosalina's words and continue with our mission."

A long pause ensued, broken by the occasional rustle of a breeze through the garden. The two both took in what the other had said, both with weighted words and pasts that have been looming on their spirits and influencing much of their present decisions.

Bowser then closed his eyes and finally broke the silence. "Every time I kidnapped Peach, I would interrogate her to find out how her and her family did it, why they did it, what happened to my family... I would get either a bowed head or another emotionless stare, and it would always come in silence. And every time, I would ask if she or any of them felt guilty at all about their actions. She would not answer that either."

He opened his eyes halfway, maintaining the quiet volume of his voice. "We live in a world where the strongest survive and the weak perish – that's how it has always been and how it will always be.

Humans have taken advantage of this world to create their ideal society at the expense of other races and species. Don't think that I don't realize that there are outliers, but those outliers are few and far between. It's those outliers that are able to see and perceive with untainted eyes, and unbiased judgment. So if what you said is true, then you may be one of those outliers."

Bowser locked eye contact with Daisy. "Whatever you do, don't let the world change that, even if it means you have to walk alone in your path for the rest of your life."

Chapter V

Broken Land :

"I am Daisy Sarasa," she said to herself. "I am a powerful fighter of the earth. I am the single best version of myself that I can be. I am unlike any other."

She was siting up in her bed, able to get some rest overnight, but not a lot. Bowser had already called for her and Warra to make their way down to the garage when they were ready to leave. The sun was just barely starting to come up over the horizon.

"Sarasa..." Daisy repeated. She got up from the bed and headed to the bathroom. She cleaned herself up a bit and then stared at her image in the mirror for a while.

"Sarasa..." she said again. She saw her wide open, glaring eyes offset by frustrated eyebrows. She had grown used to seeing this image, but the more she saw it, the more she seemed to haunt herself. Her eyes were often like that, even when she smiled. The inner turmoil within prevented her eyes from doing anything else, and the significance of the mission at hand did nothing to help remedy her expression.

She walked out of the bathroom, looking at her clenched left fist. "Sarasa..." she mumbled. She went down to the main floor and to the garage, but forgot to take her backpack with her.

Bowser, Warra, and a group of koopas were both already in the garage next to the Offroader when Daisy walked in. The large – very large – olive green SUV was ready to go. Daisy's Mach Bike was strapped to the top.

"What took you so long to get ready?" Bowser asked Daisy when he saw her walk in. "I thought you were a tomboy."

A koopa engineer walked around from the other side of the truck. "Daisy, we raised your bike an extra 2 inches off the ground and

provided accommodating shocks. The tires have been replaced with our specialty all-terrain tires featuring our patented Troopa Brand tread, and we've made modifications to the engine to boost horsepower and fuel efficiency."

"Did you put the silenced muffler on it?" the earth wielder asked.

"Yes," the engineer responded.

"Great – hey thanks! It's much appreciated," Daisy assured.

"Please tell your friends about your experience – we hope to start an independent business in the near future!" the engineer eagerly replied before leaving.

"That's an impressive vehicle," said Warra. "May I be the driver?"

"Catch the keys," Bowser said as he chucked them at the water wielder.

"I hope it's as fast as it is large," Daisy remarked. "It can take up two lanes in a road."

"Why are the seats so hard? What are they made of?" Warra asked as he tried getting himself comfortable.

"They're made of a malleable clay so that they can better mold to your body," said Bowser as-a-matter-of-factly. "For obvious reasons as you can observe by looking at my body – and so that I don't have to think about my shell ripping into any fabric."

"He's got a point," said Daisy.

"I've got points all over my shell," added Bowser.

"Well, not luxury by any means but then again this isn't a vacation," said Warra. "Very practical."

"I like the way you think," Bowser replied. "But can you drive, waterboy?"

"Most assuredly," Warra guaranteed.

"Then whenever you're ready, let's get a move on," said the Koopa King as he got into the passenger side seat. "Remember, we need to go to the Abnoba Desert region north of here."

"I'm ready when you all are," Daisy said, taking the seat behind the driver. "Since all eight of us aren't here yet, I'm just gonna ride in here and keep my bike up top."

Warra started up the engine as the garage doors opened up to the outside. The Offroader zipped down the driveway, handling and performing fairly well for its size. They were now on the road, heading for the Stone Shrine and whoever – or whatever – was lying in wait for them.

The three elemental wielders had passed the limits that the roadways could take them and went completely off-road. They had been driving at a swift pace for two hours, their surroundings shifting more into desert the further away they got from the Mushroom Kingdom. They did not noticing anything out of the ordinary yet.

Bowser looked back at Daisy. "So if we don't run into the stone wielder before we get to the Stone Shrine, couldn't you just purify it? Earth and stone seem similar enough to be interchangeable, right?"

"That won't work," Daisy said without hesitation.

"Is that so?" Bowser questioned. "Please explain. Enlighten me."

Daisy nodded. "It may seem as if the two are very similar, or even the same thing, but they are both very, very different. Earth is dirt, mud, muck, soil. It involves controlling the mixture of minerals, grains, fine ground materials, and biodegraded remains of life forms and such, like organic matter and peat. Stone is the mainstream, actual, big and huge, completely inorganic rock. For earth, even though that which is controlled is smaller, there's often a substantial amount of it, so I can see how one can get confused at times. Consequently, regardless of size, you can also see that earth wielders control all the matter that is loosely packed – like chalky or viscous material – while stone wielders are in control of the tightly

packed, solidified and hardened stuff."

"Sounds similar enough to me for there not to be an issue if one was replaced with another," said Bowser.

"Sure, earth and stone are incredibly similar..." Daisy started to say. "...Until you try to grow a plant in stone, or make a building out of earth."

"Well when you put it that way, then I can see how they can be two entirely different things," the Koopa King responded.

"Going further, think of this," said Daisy. "A gardener is digging up his lawn. It's easy enough to separate it into earth and stone. He'll just put the dirt over here and the rocks over there. Now, is the gardener going to bother separating rocks and dirt if there's no reason to – or if there isn't any distinct difference? Not all of the ground in the world is dirt and not all the ground is rock. There are however, areas where the ground is entirely one or the other. Because of that, a stone wielder will not get an advantage in a forest or the woods and an earth wielder will not get any advantage in the mountains or desert."

"Sounds like you got the short end of the stick in the elemental lottery then," said Bowser.

Daisy gave a subtle smile. "Looking back, maybe it seems stone has the upper hand over earth because of the sheer rigidity and surface area of what it involves. The average user of stone can manipulate boulders and chunks of land, and I've seen master stone wielders move whole mountains with enough power. Earth is just as effective though, as the fine grains can have many creative possibilities and applications to do things with almost the same amount of brute force as stone, only with more precision, stealth, and accuracy. But, well, stealth's not my kind of thing, so I ignore that part. Earth goes one step further by having control over seismic energies, an energy that is so minute in nature yet can be so powerful, and something that eludes the stone wielders."

"You can think of earth as the cross between water and stone," said Warra. "Earth kind of acts as the midpoint between the two, taking

some of the brute force of stone and some of the fluidity and flexibility of water. Also, from what I've seen, a stone wielder will naturally be much stronger than those around them and more heavy-set or just larger in general. Earth wielders will not automatically be given the strength that those of stone get, but they will instead be naturally endowed with prestigious endurance. Because of the nature of the elements, stone wielders will tend to be more superficial in nature while earth wielders will have a more spiritual and intuitive sense to them that is comparable to water wielders because of the earthly connection they need to have to control their element."

"I would not have thought there was so much that went into it," said Bowser.

"I'm sorry it can't all be as cut and dry as fire," Daisy remarked.

"It's a similar issue with water and ice," Warra continued. "You may think that they're similar enough to almost be considered the same thing, but you couldn't be further from the truth. With water and ice, you know that water has to be traveling at a very high speed for it to be able to pierce anything, yet ice that has been formed into an icicle is sharp enough to stab just by a simple poke. Plus, the denser you make ice, the harder, more durable, and more compact it becomes, whereas if you try to compact water, you'll just frustrate yourself and create a mess. Water's fluidity prevents such density and rigidity."

"You can dissolve stuff in water, but you can't dissolve stuff in ice," said Daisy. "That's made even more weird by the fact that ice *gets* dissolved by water-"

"Even though on a molecular level they are the same thing," Warra added. "Water absorbs heat, while ice melts against heat. When you think of water, you think of flexibility and fluidity. When you think of ice, you think of power and durability. Ice has a lot of potential energy that is just waiting to be accessed by someone, but water can counter the energy of another. This separation of elements was necessary, because a single person being able to fully use both water and ice or both earth and stone would be grossly overpowered compared to the other elements. It was all setup by the Great

Beings with balance in mind."

"So there is no 'short end of the stick' since they're all the same length," Daisy snidely remarked.

"Speaking of which," Bowser said in transition. "On our way to the Fire Shrine, I was thinking about a system we could use to determine who should fight each shrine's guardian based on that same elemental balance. It was just a theory at the time, but I think it has some bearing. If you're wondering, that's the primary reason I wanted to be the one that fought the Flame Behemoth, since-"

Daisy cut him off, saying, "You figured that since it was a beast of fire, you would need to match it with

"Yes! It made perfect sense at the time," Bowser said.

Daisy shook her head. "I know how much of a tactician you are Bowser, but again, not everything is so cut and dry, so black and white. This isn't the kind of fight where we should be worried about elemental match-ups. The best find ways to win whether or not the odds are against them, and that means that each one of us should be able to beat any and all of the guardians of each shrine regardless of element or environmental advantage. If you really want to rely on match-ups, then instead of matching up elements, we should be matching up our skills and power against that of the opposition. If we're confident enough in our own abilities, then we should all be able to overcome our weaknesses. Or are you not confident enough in your abilities? Are you not confident enough in everyone else?"

"I didn't say that," the koopa responded. "But the system seemed logical at the time."

"This is the kind of stuff and the kind of fight you just can't plan for," said the earth wielder.

Bowser grunted in mild irritation and disbelief. "This is the last thing I would expect from a person of the earth – you're proposing just rushing headlong into the enemy without a plan?"

"Isn't that what we've been doing all along?" asked Daisy. "We knew next to nothing about our enemy when we started, and we still know very little about our enemy now. We have the goal, and we have the endpoint. That's really all that's necessary right now. We know what we're doing in the big picture, so we can just let the little things fill themselves in and respond accordingly. We need the flexibility of not having a solid, rigid plan. Things could have the potential to change at each individual shrine. We should be ready to adapt to anything and any possibility. Just some guidelines or very loose and general things'll have to do until we find out more; anything extra would be a crutch. No plan is the best plan we can have for now."

"I actually wanted to fight that flame monster to make up for attacking you guys," said Warra. "I'm pretty sure I could've beaten it if I had put the necessary effort into it. And besides that, there's no guarantee that each guardian will be directly linked to any element. Bowser, be honest with yourself. You didn't know you would be dealing with a fire being in that shrine – you *assumed* that since it was the Fire Shrine, the guardian there would be flame-based. We probably can be certain they'll be linked to the elements in some way, but that doesn't mean they'll be able to use them, or even use the element of the particular shrine they guard."

Several moments later, the three elemental wielders noticed a stark change in the environment. Upon suggestion from Bowser, the trio stopped and got out of the Offroader. They surveyed the area, deeply unsettled by what they saw.

The sun had vanished from sight, producing a surprisingly cold chill in the atmosphere. All of the ground was a deep dark brownish color, jagged ends of stone jutted out at various places, and random masses of rock were suspended in midair. The mountains were displaced about and surrounded by a cracked dark teal sky that looked as if it could fall at any moment. Patches of mist and haze were scattered about the area as well. The whole region looked like a post-apocalyptic wasteland gone wrong.

"This place sounded nicer the way Rosalina described it," said Daisy.

Warra's face grew grim. "The corruption of the stone element has

advanced tremendously. The Stone Shrine must've been one of the first shrines overtaken by that figure we saw at the Fire Shrine. Judging by the effects however, I highly doubt that the disorder of stone by itself has caused all this."

"The landscape perhaps," said Bowser. "But yes, the atmosphere is something other. It must be the effects of the dimensional rift that was created. I definitely could not have planned for this."

"Well, I thought I'd run into you here," a burly voice called out.

The trio turned to see an imposing bodybuilder-esque figure come into view. Compared to Warra and Daisy, he was like a human version of Bowser. Dressed in dark brown boots, tan cargo pants, and a dark brown sleeveless training gi with chain mail underneath and a stone symbol on the left side of his top, his elemental affinity spoke for itself. Sporting a short, dark brown haircut and a five o'clock shadow, he carried a halberd on his back and had tan gloves on each hand.

When the man in brown spoke, he sounded much more friendly and down-to-earth than the impression his brutish silhouette gave off. "As a result of the dimensional rift, this mountainous desert has fused with the Dimension of the Lost. According to legend, the Dimension of the Lost is a place that exists alongside our dimension. It's a realm where lost souls that have been unable find rest are held in a kind of purgatory. Many of these souls end up trapped in this purgatory forever, unable to interact with anyone from our world and eternally doomed to silence. Unfortunately, the fusion of this region with the dimension means that we are now capable of back and forth interaction with any of the souls we may encounter."

"So it's in our best interests to keep distance from and not interact with any of those spirits," Warra concluded. "Might I ask who you are?"

"I'm, Athelstan!" the brown-clothed man replied. "I control the stone, and am one of the best users around! A woman by the name of Rosalina visited me in my sleep and filled me in on everything. We're in a helluva messed up situation aren't we?"

"Pretty much," said Daisy. "But that's why we're here! To fix it all!"

Athelstan pointed to a dome-shaped mountain about two kilometers ahead. "From what I was able to find out before I got here, the shrine is within that mountain over there."

"How were you even able to figure this all out?" Bowser asked with skepticism.

"Ancient records," Athelstan replied. "The town I'm from is loaded with scientists and archaeologists. In fact, thanks to them I was able to figure out the exact whereabouts of the other shrines as well. The strange thing is that the records themselves did not mention this particular shrine being associated with any mountain."

"What do you mean?" asked Daisy.

"We can delve into that when we get there," said Athelstan.

"Why would the Stone Shrine be deep within a desert in the first place?" asked Warra. "Were the ancients really that hard pressed to make these shrines so inaccessible?"

Athelstan took out a long dark brown headband with an embellished stone symbol and tied it on. "They were just sticking to the nature of the elements. It's pretty simple. Earth is organic, while stone is inorganic. And if earth is organic, and stone is inorganic, then that means earth is alive, and stone is dead. And a desert is essentially a dead place."

"Interesting," the water wielder commented.

"Not only that, but there is a collection of sacred scriptures hidden within this particular shrine," the stone wielder said. "My guess is that it was important enough and influential enough to seclude from society."

"So our enemy has melded together a dead place with a dead dimension," said Bowser. "That is sick and twisted on all kinds of levels."

"Let's go for the shrine before this whole area falls apart," said

Daisy.

In between the Offroader and the shrine was a rocky and uneven stretch of flatland that would've needed a tank to drive over with, so they decided to walk it. Not halfway there, they saw a lost soul off to the side that was sitting in a somewhat fetal position. Its body language was one of pure depression and remorse, as if the soul had failed to accomplish something of immense importance in the past and now is doomed until the end of time to exist with nothing but guilt. The sadness plastered on the soul's face was demoralizing.

"Let's keep moving forward," Athelstan said. "There's nothing we can do to help out that spirit, unfortunately, so let's not disturb it."

"I feel like a bystander witnessing a crime but not doing anything about it," Daisy muttered. "This is not fair."

They made their way to the base of the mountain where the Stone Shrine was, the entrance being a large cave. Another soul was leaning against the cave wall and looked at the group of fighters. It was just as pitiable as the last soul, but this one was much more animated. Without warning, it charged forward at Bowser, looking to choke him. A well timed blunt swipe by Warra's daggers prevented the soul from completing its attack. The lost spirit backed off and let loose a ghastly shriek before charging again for Bowser. This time the koopa was ready for it, swiping his claws at the soul as it came in close. The soul backed away again and moaned before floating off.

"What the hell was that all about?" Bowser yelled at the soul that had already disappeared from sight. "You're in purgatory for regrets and lack of peace and yet you decide to attack me! What sense does that make?"

"We're in a world where you can't even hope to understand another's reasons for their actions now," said Warra. "The spirit must've had its reasons, but its not our place to question them. They need rest in a place where they can't get any, so the right thing to do...is let them do as they will, whatever that may be. At least it wasn't a rabid lizalfos that leapt at you."

"I would rather it have been the lizalfos," said Bowser. "That was even creepier than that time Giygas turned himself inside out."

"I have no idea what you're talking about there," the water wielder replied.

"Good – keep it that way," said the koopa. "You should be grateful I'm not gonna tell you. I've seen some things..."

"Oh no..." Daisy uttered in partial shock.

"What?" asked Athelstan.

Daisy's voice went low. "It's what Bowser just said; our enemy has fused a dead place with a dead dimension. If we were able to see those souls, then that must mean that the fusion of a dead place and a dead dimension has created an *alive* reality – our enemy has got a whole resurrection zone here!"

"What are you saying?!" Athelstan demanded to know.

Daisy clenched her jaw. "I'm saying these souls were able to interact with us because they were brought back to life."

"Startling revelation, indeed," said Warra with anxious eyes.

"So souls could wander out of this area if they wanted to?" asked Bowser.

"I don't know, we haven't noticed any moving in the direction that we came from," said Daisy. "But when that dimensional rift was made here, it limited the expansion of the corruption of stone, so maybe it's now also limiting the souls from getting out into the main world. That's something we know we want to prevent, especially now that we know that they have the potential to be violent."

"Wait, does that mean we can't leave now that we're in here?" Bowser asked.

"We should be able to," Athelstan replied. "We're bound to our world, not the Dimension of the Lost."

"It appears to sorta be working like a jail cell," added Warra. "A prisoner is stuck in his cell because he's locked inside, but the guard is outside and has the key. So the guard can enter and exit the cell whenever he feels like it, but the prisoner can't leave. Since everything that was held within the dimensional rift was already here to begin with, it can't leave, but since we were on the outside, we can come and go without issue."

"Right, otherwise we would've still been trying to find a way to get in here," said Athelstan.

"Madness," Bowser muttered under his breath. "Absolute madness... What kind of enemy are we dealing with who's capable of doing things like this? What kind of being are we dealing with that is able to distort the lines between life and death?"

"A truly twisted being," Daisy solemnly declared. "No one should be able to mess with the boundaries between the living and the dead regardless of the reason; it's completely immoral!" She clenched her right fist and brought it up to eye level. "We have to take this guy down now! And if he wasn't bluffing, then he should be in the Stone Shrine waiting for us!"

"We have to go through the cave to enter the mountain," said Athelstan.

"Then let us enter the cave now," Warra suggested. "Quickly."

The four fighters entered the cave and swiftly made their way through the several hallways and corridors that filled the inside. Even though green, purple, and yellow neon lightstones lined the walls and ceilings for lighting, Daisy stuck to the front to take advantage of her night vision, for there were still plenty of dark areas inside for things to leap out from. The lightstones looked to have been there for dozens of years at the very least. The place had the same kind of complexity that the Fire Shrine had, but it wasn't at an overwhelming level.

"That's just weird that the Stone Shrine is the inside of this mountain," said Daisy. "I would've thought it would've been on top of a rocky basin or alongside and through the mountains, but not

completely inside of one."

"I know," said Athelstan. "I don't understand it myself. The fact that there isn't even supposed to be a mountain here at all makes things even stranger."

"About that," Daisy said. "What's the deal behind that whole issue?"

"A group of archaeologists were exploring in this area long ago and came across the very same building that we're going through right now in this exact same location," Athelstan explained. "But at that time, there was no mountain here to speak of. This was all built around a rock formation and a large plateau that could not be scaled. Once it was confirmed that this was the Stone Shrine, the area was completely left alone. The archaeologists made records that the shrine existed, but no one ever wanted to make their way out here again because of the hostile desert environment. You gotta understand, this area is miles and miles away from civilization and completely uninhabitable. Like I said earlier, the Abnoba Desert's a dead place, so there's very little reason for anybody to even consider coming out here."

"So what's the mountain doing here?" Daisy asked in confusion.

"I can't even began to answer that," Athelstan replied.

"The corruption of the stone element is the only cause that makes sense," reasoned Bowser. "At least, it should be."

"Perhaps the Stone Shrine was actually just trying to protect itself?" suggested Warra.

"Are you trying to imply that a non-living structure actually made a conscious decision in self-defense?" asked Daisy. "Seriously, what is going on with this world?"

"No, don't overcomplicate everything," said Bowser. "Remember what we saw earlier; all sorts of mountains were distorted and displaced and there were slabs of stone randomly scattered about both on the ground and floating in the sky. This was simply the corruption of stone that was screwing up the landscape – and

consequently, reality."

"That doesn't explain the precision needed for a mountain to be placed directly over the shrine *without* altering the shrine's structure in any way!" Daisy shouted. "Look around! All these rooms and halls are independent of the mountain! It's like somebody hollowed out a mountain to make it like a party hat and dropped it over the shrine! Something's just not adding up here..."

As if it were waiting for a verbal cue, a huge chunk of the ceiling was ripped away and sent skyward, leaving a gaping hole to the outside, only to stop at about a thousand feet into the air. Then another large chunk was ripped away and sent in the opposite direction. A large booming crash filled the air as that second mass of rock collided with another different mass of rock. The resulting debris from the crash then fell *upwards* for a couple seconds before stopping and becoming suspended in midair.

"Oh everything is adding up fine," said the Koopa King. "Reality here is just falling apart."

"You know, if we weren't in the situation that we're in right now, I'd be laughing at those anti-gravity rocks," said Athelstan.

An upcoming dead end brought the elemental wielders to a halt. They looked around and found no other way to move but back in the direction in which they came from.

"I don't understand," said Daisy. "The Fire Shrine had a door that led to the gemstone room, but there's no door here at all."

"It's up there!" Warra said, pointing up the wall. "But it actually appears to be more of a gate."

The gate was a few hundred feet up the wall, enclosed by rock barriers in all directions to prevent anyone from being able to do anything but go through it. The only question was how to reach it. The gate was way too high up to jump, and the walls were too steep to scale. In fact, the walls were vertical. Daisy could wall jump and actually use her Crystal Grip to cling to the walls, but the rest could not do either one.

"This must be the plateau we have to get on top of," said Bowser.

"So how do we get up there?" asked Warra. "That has to be where the Stone Gemstone is."

"Allow me," said Athelstan. The stone wielder focused and broke free the chunk of rocky ground the four of them were standing on. He began elevating it up into the air by sliding it up along the wall, mimicking an elevator so that they could reach the gate and pass through.

Chapter VI

The Enemy Is... :

The Stone Gemstone room was a vast and spherical chamber much like the Fire Gemstone room from the Fire Shrine. The chamber was very dark, even with the strange neon lightstones. It was almost as if the lightstones were amplifying the ominous ambience that had fallen over the land. As the four warriors walked into the enclosed expanse, they noticed that the walls towards the back of the room had a section loaded with writing in some sort of ancient dialect. Also in the back of the room, underneath the writing and sitting right on top of the structure where the Stone Gemstone rested was the figure clad in dark blue that the fighters had encountered after the battle at the Fire Shrine.

"We made it here," Daisy announced in a tone that matched the room's atmosphere. "So are you gonna tell us who you are and what you're up to or am I gonna have to beat the information out of you?"

"Arrogant little runt," said the dark blue figure. "You speak with overconfident threats when you know that you know not who or what you're dealing with."

"That's because you won't tell us!" Daisy snapped.

"I had said that you must prove you are worth my time," stated the dark blue figure. "Then, if you are worthy enough, if you insist on putting yourself headfirst into the path of an unstoppable storm, if you feel your insignificant powers can stand against and rival an overpowering divine presence...then and only then, I may tell you who I am. But I also said, if you die, then your demise is solely on your own hands and you have no one for you to blame but yourselves for thinking you could handle someone way out of your league."

"Well, I'm not dealing with someone out of my league," Daisy said, crossing her arms and putting her back in a comfortable arch.

The dark figure sighed in boredom. "Maybe I should kill you first for your insubordination."

"I'd like to see you try!" Daisy shot back.

"Once again, you don't *listen* ," the figure replied with a hint of irritation. "You're the smallest one here and you're the only one that's been vocal so far."

"That's only because you're running your mouth instead of letting your fists do the talking!"

"I will repeat for the last time – you must prove your worth if you even hope to have the opportunity of challenging me."

"Why do that when we can settle this now?" Daisy asserted. She had not backed down one bit at all and seemed to be getting even more riled up with each statement made.

"Is she always like this?" Athelstan asked to finally break the two-person exchange.

"Apparently," answered Warra.

"She's going to get herself killed like that," the stone wielder commented.

"Probably," added Bowser.

The dark blue figure zeroed his eyes in closer on Daisy, focusing on her face. "What is your name?" he asked with genuine curiosity.

"I'm Daisy Sarasa!" the earth wielder announced, assuming her battle stance. "And you're finished!"

The figure ignored the threat. "I thought you looked familiar..."

Daisy suddenly calmed down after hearing that statement. *What* , she thought. *I've never seen him in my life before yesterday...*

The figure perked up. "Ah yes, I see I finally have your attention now. The resemblance between you and your father is undeniable.

Your father was really something else...and still is, unfortunately."

Daisy's tone returned to mirroring the quiet and dark environment. "What's that supposed to mean?" She then added with confusion in her voice, "How do you know my father?"

"He has a notorious reputation," The figure responded. "But you should know this already; you are his child, aren't you?"

Daisy clenched her teeth and began to tremble in quiet anger.

"Not that it matters if you know your own father or not," the dark being continued. "I know who he is. He is a prime example of why I am doing what I am doing."

"You're not making any sense here," said a perplexed Daisy.

"You simply just don't understand what I am trying to do," said the figure. "And you never will."

"Bold statement," said Athelstan.

"Just look!" the figure yelled, gesturing to the wall behind him. "Have you not noticed the ancient scriptures along the walls of this room? Of course not. You can't even read them. You could not even hope to understand their meaning."

"You've got to be kidding me," Bowser groaned. "Are you and Rosalina best buds or something? I've had enough of your and her prophetic crap already!"

"Oh, this is no prophecy," the dark blue being assured. "This is history...from the very beginning. Valuable ancient records that were kept in secrecy here. We are standing in the very first elemental shrine that was created by the great beings. These ancient scriptures are worth more than all the wealth in the world, and yet the world is too immature and selfish to recognize it. That's a surprising response coming from you Bowser, especially considering all that you've experienced first hand..." He paused before finishing with emphasis, "The pains of your people..."

Bowser's eyes grew wide. "What?! You know of myself *and* Daisy?

Explain!"

"I don't have to," the figure said. "The ancient scriptures themselves explain. They explain my purpose. Allow me to key in on a particular piece to translate: Let stone be the world's mold. Let earth be the harbinger of life. Let fire bring heat to the land. Let water nourish the surroundings. Let air inspire motivation and freedom. Let ice instill cold and preservation. Let light be the energy and guidance for all. Let shadow bring relaxation and rest. All eight shape the world. All eight are reality."

"That didn't explain anything," the Koopa King said in disappointment.

"It's not my fault you don't understand," the dark being condescendingly replied.

A sudden shift occurred. Daisy, Bowser, Athelstan, and Warra all looked up to see that the remains of the mountain ceiling were ripped off and floating away, turning the cave into an open ground. Then what was left of the mountain walls fractured into various pieces and moved away. They now stood on what remained – a plateau several hundred feet high, the rest of the Stone Shrine down the wall they had just climbed.

"I'd had enough of that accursed mountain anyways," the figure nonchalantly said.

"Is this how you get off? Contorting reality in such a destructive manner?" asked Daisy. "You don't care at all what happens to the world do you?"

"It would take far more time and effort to explain what I'm trying to do than I am willing to spend," the dark being declared, levitating into the air. "Your ignorance is painful, your presence here is unnecessary, and you still wish to oppose me. For those reasons, you must perish."

Daisy's eyes perked up. *I'm starting to sense something* , she thought. *Something different* . A slight breeze picked up.

"Unfortunately for you, the Flame Behemoth was by far my weakest enlistment," the dark being said. "The first ones in a quest are always the easiest; you will not have nearly as easy a time facing what I have in store for you here..."

The figure flew into the sky and made a sweep with his arm, creating another dimensional rift. A rapidly revolving lavender vortex formed overhead, directly in line with the circular plateau. Once it achieved a certain speed, a portal emerged in the center of the vortex and a bolt of electricity came through to strike the ground in front of the four elemental fighters. Then the strangest possible event so far began to take place. Wandering lost souls from all across the landscape gathered themselves around the portal and entered it in droves. None of the four elemental wielders could tell why the spirits were being drawn towards the portal nor could they even tell whether the spirits were being forced inside or entering on their own accord. Thousands made their way through before the exodus ceased. The portal then closed, but the vortex remained overhead and looked to now be a permanent piece of the area.

Two frightful beings emerged from underneath the ground where the electricity had struck, each freakishly horrific in nature. The first, was in a fitted, knee-cut blood red robe that was torn all around the bottom, black pants and boots, a black cowl neck hood, and black forearm gauntlets, all topped off with a golden staff. The second being was in black cargo pants, brown boots and a lightly armored sleeveless shirt. This second one was bald with ancient earrings, and had ancient markings on both shoulders, gunmetal wrist wraps, and a thick-bladed scimitar sheathed to his shirt's back. They were absurdly lean, as if they had no body fat whatsoever and were running on sheer will alone...or something other. They looked human, but their flesh was gray with semi-visible crimson veins. Neon blue orbs occupied where their eyes were supposed to be.

The figure loomed overhead, admiring his summoning. With a thundering voice, he announced in reference to the newly summoned beings, "Meet Necromancer...and Necropaladin."

"What are they?" Bowser asked in shock.

"The result of reanimation," the figure responded. "Much more

resourceful than resurrection."

"Absolutely insane..." Daisy said under her breath.

The Necromancer appeared closer in stature to Warra, while the Necropaladin looked closer in form to Athelstan. Each breath the two reanimated fiends took was easily audible.

"Kill them all," the dark being ordered. "Do not lose this shrine."

"Understood," Necromancer replied with a cool, metallic voice.

"I may as well tell you since you will not last more than four minutes," said the dark figure. "I am Elkon. I will be the one to usher in a great change in this world. You who wish to oppose this change will be executed by Necromancer and Necropaladin."

Necromancer and Necropaladin both spread apart and shifted to offset stances. Stoicly furious expressions made up their faces.

"Enjoy death," Elkon said. And with that, the being flashed and disappeared in a burst of pink light.

"Damn it!" Daisy shouted. "He got away again! Stop doing that!"

"Never mind him," said Bowser. "We have two formidable entities here to deal with that we cannot ignore."

"I'll take a crack at 'em!" Daisy eagerly announced, stepping forward.

"Let your arm heal completely first," Warra said. "Or did you forget?"

Daisy frowned, but stepped back. Her arm was still injured from the day before and although it wasn't serious, it was still moderately painful and tender. It was in everyone's best interests for her to sit this one out in case the pain became a hindrance.

"I have a very high pain tolerance you know..." she muttered.

"I'm not doubting that for a second," the water wielder replied. "So save that pain tolerance for later on."

"I'll be glad to beat down these corpses," Athelstan declared, coming out to the front of the team.

"And since there's two," Warra said as he stepped forward. "I shall take up the fight as well." He unsheathed his twin daggers, and Athelstan pulled out his halberd. Daisy and Bowser backed up towards the gate to give space to what would be the battlefield.

"You mortal scum," Necromancer spat. "Your kind sickens me."

"You're just a walking cadaver, the both of you," Athelstan said, twirling his halberd in his hands.

"The quicker we beat these guys, the better," Warra said to the stone wielder. "Dead or undead, these are very powerful beings. I don't think we want to risk a mistake against opponents like these."

"Right," said Athelstan, who had pointed his halberd towards the sky. He was already gathering rocks and boulders from the lowland area surrounding the shrine, molding them all together directly overhead, piece by piece, chunk by chunk, until he had coalesced a large, hovering mass of what must have been fourteen tons of stone.

"Amazing," Bowser said in awe. "He was able to channel his elemental energy and focus through his weapon! I never thought of that."

Daisy nodded. "It must be to amplify elemental control and to expend less energy in the same way I have my ankle and wrist weights. I'm pretty sure Warra can do the same thing with his daggers, but this environment would be tough for him to use his element."

Bowser shrugged. "I already have excellent control over fire, so I never thought to use anything to enhance it. I don't think I even have room to enhance my control even if I wanted to."

"There's always room for improvement, Bowser," said Daisy, smiling.

"Catch," the brown-clothed warrior said, launching the colossal mass

towards the two undead fiends. The sheer size of the projectile rock prevented it from moving very fast. Necromancer and Necropaladin both stared at the incoming projectile, appearing to be dissatisfied. Necropaladin dropped his blade and jumped forward to meet the heaping mass of stone. The fiend caught the mass with both hands and locked onto it, skidding across the arena until coming to a halt just in front of Necromancer. Then in one swift motion, Necropaladin tossed the mass high into the air for the fiend mage to fire off a bolt of energy from his staff, destroying the immense rock in midair and scattering it about all throughout the land.

"You mortals are so unoriginal," Necromancer flatly said.

"Well, I wasn't expecting that at all," Athelstan muttered.

"All you accomplished with that maneuver was a waste of energy," said Necromancer.

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" said the stone wielder as he raised his halberd again and regathered some of the broken chunks of rock overhead. This time, he made the mass only about a fourth the size of the first. At that moment, the blade of his halberd gleamed for a half second, and the heap of stone began transforming and melding into a hulking formation of shining material.

"Try deflecting this – the advanced form of stone!" Athelstan shouted, sending the mass towards the undead fiends. "Metal!"

As the metal made its way towards Necromancer and Necropaladin, again, Necropaladin jumped forward and attempted to catch the attack. This time however, the fiend warrior could not catch the mass, and instead took it head-on. A large cloud of dust and debris kicked up into the air, momentarily occluding the vision of everyone.

"Alright!" Athelstan cheered. "Let's assess the damage." He then devolved the metal back into stone and shifted it all out of the way off to the far side of the battlefield for later usage.

"Metal, that's interesting," said Bowser. "But against an undead being..."

When the dust settled, a grotesque sight became visible. Necromancer was spared since he was a good distance behind Necropaladin. However, Necropaladin did not have nearly the same luck that his counterpart had. The attack left the fiend warrior's body laid out on the ground, his entire right leg disconnected and his left arm completely mangled. Random gashes littered his body and limbs, but the bleeding was absent. Necropaladin's blood couldn't bleed, for it was solid, not liquid.

"I think you overdid it a bit, Athelstan," said Warra.

"No, their decayed flesh just couldn't handle it," the stone wielder replied.

"That may be so," said the fiend mage. "But I am a necromancer." He turned to the ravaged body of his counterpart and raised his staff. The head of the staff began to glow a ghastly pink and started producing a dull humming noise. Within seconds, the dismembered leg of the Necropaladin slipped back into the hip socket of his body, and structure was restored to his crippled arm. The fiend warrior was brought to his feet, and, besides half the flesh of his left arm being gone and all the flesh from the top of his right leg absent as well, looked none the worse from his experience. Despite clearly showing damage, he stood as though he was never hit.

Chapter VII

The Unrelenting Undead :

Daisy stared at Necropaladin, grim and surly in her eyes. She had just seen the fiend warrior practically get dismantled and then put back together in a matter of moments, but what really concerned her was the lack of blood loss and the lack of even any sign of pain. The incredulity in her face would've been enough to convince anyone who had just walked in on the scene that the situation had become gravely serious.

He's standing as if nothing happened , she thought. *But what was wrong with his blood? It was solidified! Does that mean there's no pulse? What are we dealing with here?* She clenched her teeth and fists. *Damn it Elkon, you insane psychopath...*

"I've never seen anything like this before," Bowser said, foreboding in tone. "Are these beings even alive?"

"They can't be – they don't have any cardiovascular flow," Daisy reasoned. "Quite frankly they shouldn't even have a heart – or any organs for that matter – if their bodies are that decayed. The fact that they have blood is nonsensical enough-"

"But for it to be solidified in a way to make it seem like it was never meant to move in the first place is just plain absurd!" Bowser finished.

"Precisely," said Daisy. "But dead or alive, Athelstan and Warra gotta take them down so we can get to the Stone Gemstone."

Necromancer stood tall, saying to the four elemental wielders, "Now do you realize the mercy that you will plead for at the hands of us is something you should not be so willing to throw away? You mortals should be glad you're still breathing, but no longer!"

The Necropaladin corpse launched himself at Athelstan with his scimitar in hand and initiated what seemed to be an endless series

of sword swipes. Athelstan was able to counter by blocking with his halberd. He could not evade, for every swipe the Necropaladin made was diagonal. The fiend warrior's swings transmitted shear and compression forces into Athelstan's body with each hit the stone wielder blocked. Athelstan made sure he got his halberd up to defend against each swing and prevent from getting hit, though Necropaladin seemed content with just beating down on the stone wielder's blocks. None of the four elemental wielders seemed to be aware yet of what Necropaladin was trying to accomplish.

"See?" Necromancer called out. "Your brown friend is slowly meeting his death, and soon each of you will follow in succession."

"What are you saying?" Daisy shouted. "It's even! Athelstan's just fine! You're the one whose arm can get blown off by sneezing!" She looked on with confidence as Athelstan continued to block the incoming attacks.

No , Bowser thought. *Athelstan is going to be cut down if he can't escape those strings of attacks.*

Necropaladin continued the unrelenting assault, repeatedly making blade clash with blade. The fiend warrior did not seem to be slowing down or tiring at all, but Athelstan kept blocking each swing. The exchange went on for several more moments, Athelstan unable to create any distance from his opponent.

"Keep up the effort!" Warra urged.

"Now watch as your mortal bodies show who is really lacking durability," Necromancer declared.

Daisy's eyes perked up as she realized what Bowser had already figured out. Athelstan was getting tired quick – very quick. For as mighty as the stone wielder was, Necropaladin had been beating him down. The fiend warrior was not showing any signs of fatigue, and it was taking everything Athelstan had to keep up the blocking. Unfortunately, there was a second attribute to the situation.

"All the shock from the clashing blades is bypassing the Necropaladin and being transmitted directly into Athelstan's body,"

Bowser said in observation. "Necropaladin's dead body is mimicking a lifeless object in that any and all force caused by the conflicting weapons is being channeled through Athelstan's body, even though Necropaladin is the one on the offense! Athelstan has felt every hit that Necropaladin has thrown without taking direct contact from the Necropaladin's blade!"

"What?! Daisy asked in disbelief. At first, she couldn't comprehend what exactly the Koopa King was trying to get at. She then thought back to an evening when she was chopping tree trunks with a dull ax. Daisy had more than enough strength to make the ax cut through the trunks as if the ax was sharp. Frequently though, the blade would only chip into the tree trunk without going through, causing a massive rebound of the force of Daisy's swing to get sent right back into her body. The force from each of those failed strikes caused sharp and persistently dull aches and pains in her arms from her fingers all the way up to her clavicles. She then realized the same thing was happening to Athelstan, only much worse. "Oh, now I get it," she murmured.

After a couple more swings, Necropaladin finally stopped the onslaught and put away his scimitar. Athelstan, trying to handle the jarring dull pain that was coursing through his entire body, was unable to move. It didn't take long though for the pain to overwhelm him, and the semi-conscious stone wielder collapsed onto the ground. Necropaladin had beaten Athelstan without landing a hit on him.

"Hang on, Athelstan!" Warra yelled as he rushed towards Necropaladin.

Necromancer quickly flew forward in front of Warra, declaring to the water wielder, "No, you're dealing with me." The fiend mage jammed his staff into Warra's midsection and swung it around to pin Warra into the ground. "Now just stay here and view your teammate's extermination," Necromancer finished.

Athelstan was barely moving when Necropaladin shifted to stand over him. The fiend warrior then grabbed the stone wielder by the throat, picked him up, and placed a hand on his elbow, looking ready to snap his arm, if not rip it off entirely.

"That's it! I'm coming in!" Daisy yelled, preparing to dash forward and attempt a save.

Just then, a spinning ninjato came through the air and struck the Necropaladin in the arm, loosening his grip on Athelstan and causing him to drop the brown-clothed fighter onto the ground a few yards away.

"Impressive, Daisy," Bowser said in praise. "I didn't even remember you bringing any weapon or tool."

"No, that wasn't me!" Daisy exclaimed.

"What?!" Bowser asked.

A broad-shouldered but wiry and svelte man made a landing in front of Athelstan. The newcomer wore a black double tassel hat with dark green ends and trim over his black hair, his body clad in a dark green tunic and matching gloves, black pants, and boots, a belt, undershirt, and hip sheath all in silver. His brown eyes flashed as he summoned a gust of air to blow the Necropaladin away and off his feet. He then turned towards the Necromancer and did the same, but Necromancer quickly caught himself the moment he was sent hurtling through the air. The green-clothed man with the air symbol displayed on the sides of both sleeves of his tunic went to pick up and sheath his ninjato.

"How did you get up here without stone?" Bowser demanded to know from the new fighter. "And who are you?!"

"Wall jumping!" the green-clothed warrior cheerfully replied. "That steep wall to the gate was three-sided you know! As for who I am; I am Marut!" He turned to Athelstan. "You rest now, dude! We need you conscious to cleanse the stone element once we've beaten these two!"

Marut made a giant leap forward to land right in front of Necropaladin. The fiend warrior immediately responded with a kick, only for Marut to catch the flying foot with his hands. The air wielder then ducked underneath while still holding onto Necropaladin's foot and made a leg sweeping kick to the fiend's other foot to knock him

to the ground and flat on his back. Marut then jumped and made a downward roundhouse kick aimed at the fiend's neck. Due to the decayed connective tissue of the undead Necropaladin, the attack resulted in the fiend's head getting knocked twenty yards away from his body.

"That was fast!" Daisy exclaimed. "He's as fast as I am – quite possibly more! It was like a green and silver blur!"

"I can also do this!" said Marut. Creating three tornadoes the size of his hands, he began juggling them by taking advantage of their rotational forces. "Pretty rad, huh? Watch this!" He dispelled two of the tornadoes can caught the remaining one on his outstretched tongue.

"He's acting like that in a fight like this?" Bowser asked in disbelief. "He can't be older than fourteen, he just can't be."

"I'm actually eighteen," Marut said with an obviously obstructed voice.

"Don't tell me," said Bowser. "Are you the air wielder who's supposed to help us with these shrines?"

Marut swallowed the mini tornado. "Yes!" he answered before the tornado he swallowed made him spin around in place. Once he stopped spinning, he stood there laughing at himself.

"Dear lord, preserve us all," the Koopa King said with a facepalm.

"You mean like strawberry preserves?" Marut asked with big eyes.

"WHAT?!" Bowser yelled. "ROSALINA!"

"I like preserves," said the green-clothed warrior. "Peanut butter and preserves sandwich."

"There'll be plenty of the 'strawberry preserves' for you in the afterlife," Necromancer said. The fiend mage struck his staff into the ground, creating a long crack that extended from the staff to just underneath where Marut was. Sensing something strange about his opponent's move, the air wielder stepped to the side just as a wall of

piercing light energy shot out through the crack. The light radiated a half mile into the sky for several seconds before fading out. The crack in the ground closed back up as Necromancer pulled out his staff.

Marut jumped into the air and came down fast, aiming to slam his foot down on the Necromancer, but Necromancer countered by thrusting his staff into Marut's torso and forcing the air wielder down into the ground. At that moment, Warra came charging in and attacked with a spin kick that knocked back the fiend mage and prevented any follow-up strike on Marut.

Warra helped Marut to his feet, and Daisy went to pull back the still semi-conscious Athelstan. Necromancer had stumbled backwards a good ten feet when he got double-teamed by the fighters of air and water. Warra jammed his foot right into the left side of the fiend, then Marut gave Necromancer a combo that began with a sharp spinning uppercut followed by a back kick and finished with a two-handed palm strike right into the fiend's chest. Necromancer got sent skidding along the ground and almost came close to sliding off the plateau top into a several hundred foot drop. Not surprisingly, the Necromancer got up and showed no signs of pain.

"It's just as I thought," said Warra. "These undead beings can't sense pain. They're just going to keep getting back up and attempt to wear us down."

"Well, not the warrior guy," Marut corrected. "I knocked his head off!"

"Marut!" Daisy called out.

Marut turned to see Daisy pointing at a headless Necropaladin standing on his feet and holding his decapitated head in his hands.

"Okay, I guess you have a point," Marut said to Warra with worry.

Necromancer lifted his staff and pointed it at the headless fiend. The staff head gave off a faint pink and yellow glow and lifted the fiend warrior's head out of his hand. The head of the Necropaladin was raised onto Necropaladin's neck and sealed back on, briefly emitting a circular beam of pink light around where his head had originally

snapped off. Once again, the two undead fiends stood ready to fight.

"Did you see that?" asked Marut. "The Necromancer flashed his staff and the Necropaladin's head was returned to his body!"

"It appears that Necropaladin is actually under the influence of Necromancer," Bowser said. "In fact, Necromancer may have full control over Necropaladin. To whatever degree it may be, there's some sort of link between the two."

Warra nodded. "That Necromancer also seems capable of performing some sort of healing spell that he keeps using on the Necropaladin. However, he doesn't seem to be able to heal himself."

"Doesn't matter if he can heal himself or not," said Daisy. "He still seems to have the same sort of immunity to bodily harm that the Necropaladin has."

"Not only that, but these guys are not limited at all by physical energy," Bowser added. "It's like they have absolutely nothing to run on, yet they're still moving around regardless."

"We have to beat these guys to a pulp," Daisy concluded. "Literally. Neither seem to be slowed down at all by any sort of damage or injury, even when dealt the most severe forms of mutilation. So we just have to destroy their bodies entirely so that they literally can't do anything. Otherwise, they'll still be conscious; and given what they've shown us so far, they'll still be ready to fight whether or not they're missing limbs."

"Really? Is that what this is coming down to now?" Bowser muttered in question. "What a crude way to win."

"Hey, we have a mission to do and that means we need to win battles like these, no matter how gritty and imperfect they may be!" Daisy asserted. "Besides, these hard fought victories are the best kinds of victories to have!"

Necromancer and Necropaladin both closed the distance between them and the wielders of air and water, and just as they always have, they stood like they had not even so much as lifted a finger.

Warra and Marut hunched over and got themselves ready for more action.

"I have an idea," Warra said to Marut. "This shouldn't be too difficult to do because their bodies are fragile enough for it to work. But you need to distract them. *Both* of them."

"Aye aye, cap'n!" Marut exclaimed. He proceeded to gather a large mass of air around the plateau, throwing off the pressure gradients and causing the wind to pickup and gust like crazy in random directions. He kept pulling in air and releasing it in a cycle that made the air around them act possessed. The broken pieces of rock and boulder from earlier rolled around like bowling balls. All the while, Warra kept his eyes closed in focus. Then without notice, the wind shifted into two updrafts aimed at both Necromancer and Necropaladin. The gusts of wind lifted the fiends up off the ground and sent them high into the air. Then Marut resumed the chaotic winds to juggle them while they were airborne. The two fiends tumbled through the air without any control of themselves. By sheer coincidence, a massive chunk of the landscape that was zipping through the air of the broken land came into view and struck both the fiends in midair.

"Well, that was pretty convenient!" said Marut. "Thanks, corrupted desert!"

A well-timed swipe by Necromancer of his staff sent a wave of light energy aimed at Marut and Warra. Marut had to cancel his gust juggling to counter the incoming light wave with an air sphere. Necromancer and Necropaladin both came sinking out of the sky and back onto the plateau, maneuvering themselves so that they could land on their feet. Not a half second after they landed, Marut was already on top of them, ninjato in hand. With formidable speed, Marut began his chain of attacks. The first downard ninjato swipe got blocked by Necromancer's staff, the second swipe caught Necropaladin's scimitar, the third and fourth were aimed at the dirt to kick up dust and debris, and the fifth knocked the staff out of Necromancer's hands. Necropaladin took a horizontal swipe but could not make the move in time to catch Marut before he leapt into the air and made a series of somersaults to turn into what was basically a revolving blade. He struck Necropaladin on his chest and

landed in front of him to attempt a follow up attack, stopping and jumping backwards instead when he saw that the fiend warrior attempted to impale him with his scimitar.

Marut's feet skidded across the ground from the evasion before stopping his momentum, but before he could blink, Necropaladin got in his face and slammed his elbow into Marut's sternum. The painful hit dropped the air wielder to his knees, at which point the follow-up downward punch made contact on the back of his head. With Marut face down on the ground, Necropaladin got ready to thrust his scimitar into the green-clothed fighter's body. The scimitar struck the ground, the stab too slow to catch Marut, who managed to roll along the ground and out of the way just before the blade could make contact with him. His roll transitioned into a series of acrobatic somersaults and flips that put him a good ways away from the fiend warrior.

"You can dodge all you want, but you will soon be the victim of fatigue and submit both this battle and your life," Necromancer echoed.

"This battle will be over long before that happens!" Marut responded. With his ninjato, he made a slashing motion that produced a slicing wave of air aimed at Necromancer. Necropaladin jumped in the front of the swipe and batted it down into the ground with his blade. Necromancer stepped out of the shadow of Necropaladin and aimed his staff at Marut. The staff head crackled with energy, but before any further reaction could be made by anyone, a massive, continuous blast of water six feet in diameter struck Necropaladin head on and completely overran the fiend warrior. Necromancer had dodged the blast in time, realizing that he had just fallen prey to a ploy.

"You were using diversion tactics?!" Necromancer yelled at Marut.

"Guilty as charged," said Marut.

After a few moments had passed, the column of water stopped flowing, and the origin of the attack was in clear sight. It was a very tired and very short of breath Warra. Necromancer stared down the water wielder and took notice of the extreme fatigue Warra

displayed.

"It appears that last blast drained you of a great deal of energy," said Necromancer. "You may want to be a bit more conservative with your water in this dry environment."

"It did; I'm completely spent," Warra confirmed. "But your partner there looks like he's in far worse shape; that is, he would look like it if you could find him."

"What?" Necromancer asked as he turned his head. He Necropaladin reduced to a wet pile of fleshy soup where the fiend warrior formerly stood. "What did you do..."

Warra smiled, short of breath. "I used my most powerful attack – the Aquavado, a hydrocannon – to pulverize that fiend into oblivion. His fragile, undead body could not withstand the unforgiving pressure of the water, so that is what remains of him; or rather, what doesn't remain of him. You can't reanimate or repair him now that he has no body."

"You..." Necromancer grumbled. Scorn and anger filled his voice, the first actual showing of emotion from the fiend mage. Warra laughed softly and took a few more breaths before he fell over and passed out.

"Warra! Get up!" Daisy shouted, running over to the fallen water wielder.

"He'll be fine," said Bowser. "It's Marut we need to worry about; he still has to deal with Necromancer."

"Brace yourself," said Necromancer. "This is the last round, because I intend to finish this now and eradicate you all."

"Not a chance!" Marut firmly declared.

"Observe," said the fiend mage. He began spinning his staff in place as the staff head and bottom end lit up. Necromancer then threw the staff directly at the anticipating Marut. The staff sliced through the air with furious rotation, creating the sound of a saw blade and emitting "swords" of light four feet long from both ends. Marut leapt high up

into the air to avoid the rapidly spinning weapon and used his air abilities to slow his descent to a float once he reached his apex. Unfortunately, he looked down to see the spinning staff had followed him up. Quick thinking and reflexes allowed him to move just out of the way of the incoming staff, but once the staff missed again, it stopped in its trajectory and headed right for Marut for a third time. Again, Marut moved out of the way, and again, the staff made a sharp cut through the air. The staff kept coming for the air wielder, forcing him into various aerial maneuvers to dodge as he heard the buzzing sound of the light blades with each passing. Marut whipped his body into a handful of rotations to create an instant deflective twister around him to bat away the staff. That almost sent the staff crashing into the ground, but it was able to rebound before it hit the surface and shot back up into the air. The light blades on each end had made clean slices into the plateau on its go around.

The still descending green-clothed fighter caught a glimpse of Necromancer, who had been manipulating the staff through arm movements. As the staff made its way towards Marut again, he made an aerial backflip to evade once more and in exchange sent a massive swath of wind from his ninjato straight at the fiend mage to knock him off of his feet. Almost instantly, the staff's light blades dimmed out and the weapon began to lose its spin. Marut caught the staff and used the air to switch the speed of his descent from slow to very quick. He did not land on the ground, but rather touched down on one foot with staff and ninjato in hand and used that foot to propel himself with blinding speed towards the recovering Necromancer. Marut was up on Necromancer in a second and delivered a high velocity bicycle kick, only for Necromancer to catch the incoming foot. He took the momentum and used it to spin Marut around with the intention of slamming him into the ground and likely crippling his opponent through the combined forces, but once again Marut was able to counter. The air wielder jammed the staff and his ninjato into the ground to stabilize himself so that he could yet again transfer all the momentum back into the leg of the foot that Necromancer had a hold of and whip his leg to send the fiend flying across the plateau. The accumulated momentum combined with the extra speed and the torque absorbed from the lever action was way too much for the decayed corpse to handle, causing his body to rip from his arms and go flying through the air with blistering speed.

Necromancer attempted to catch himself in the air before he was sent hurtling off the plateau, but his fragile body could not handle trying to go from over two hundred miles per hour to zero in a quarter of a second. Necromancer instead ended up ripping his own body to shreds, bringing about his own demise.

"Whoa, did Necromancer seriously just do that?" Daisy asked, trying to grasp what just happened.

"He didn't have much of a choice," said Bowser, a few beads of sweat on his head. "At the speed he was going, he would've been traveling almost parallel to the ground and without a doubt would've been sent crashing into one of the mountains. There was no chance at all he would've slowed down before then. He would've been pulverized from the impact. These fiends were powerful, but their frail bodies were a crucial flaw. I reiterate everything I said earlier; what a way to win..."

"Wow, what a battle!" exclaimed Marut. "All those high speed moves have strained my joints a bit." He chucked the staff off the plateau and pried off the bodyless arms from his leg with his ninjato.

"Not bad at all, Marut," said Bowser. "You were pretty good."

Marut trotted up to the downed stone wielder. "Are you alright, bro?" he asked.

"I'm alright," Athelstan grunted, smiling as he slowly got to his feet. "My whole body's ringing...but I'm alive, and I can move. That's all that matters."

"Lookout!" Daisy shouted at Marut. The earth wielder dashed towards the hostile and still moving undead arms Marut had pulled off and landed heavy punches on both of them, flattening the limbs. She then jumped out of the way for Bowser to throw two highly heated fire balls to incinerate the arms.

"They have no quit in them at all!" Bowser exclaimed.

"Talk about your restless spirits," said Marut as Daisy went to grab and toss Warra up on her shoulder. "I was definally not expecting

that!"

"Uh, *definitely* ?!" Bowser said.

"Yes!" Marut replied, oblivious to the correction.

"They were simply spirits that had somehow regained control of their aged and decrepit corpses," said Athelstan. "But their abilities must've been morphed and enhanced somehow through their time in this dimension, as if they were slowly taking in the atmosphere of this realm as part of their being. Most of their power and energy attacks were light-based, so they must have possessed some control over light from when they were alive and retained it through death."

"Strange move to put light wielding fighters in the Stone Shine," said Bowser. "But I suppose this was the only place where he could've gotten away with doing so considering the fact that they were undead – whatever that even means."

"Goodbye..." Daisy said to the sky as if she was talking to Necromancer and Necropaladin. "I hope you find solace in your rest. You two must've been a part of this dimension like the rest of those wandering souls were. I sympathize with your struggles, whatever they may have been."

"What are you doing trying to justify them?!" asked Bowser. "We were 'mortal scum' they were just trying to kill moments ago! Seconds ago if you count those arms!"

"They must've had reason!" Daisy shot back. "Something serious must've happened to them to warrant fighting for Elkon."

"I suppose next you're going to try and justify what Elkon's doing?" Bowser asked with a reddened face. He pulled the Dimensional Mirror out from his shoulder pocket. "Athelstan! C'mon and let's take care of this Stone Gemstone."

"Heh, Stone Gem *stone* ," Marut pointed out with a laugh.

Bowser and Athelstan walked up to the pedestal on the backside of the plateau and stopped a good ten feet away from it. The Koopa

King held up the mirror, making sure the lens was in line with the gemstone.

"Just aim your elemental energy through the lens," Bowser explained. "But not your actual element; just your elemental energy. I don't want the world to succumb to destruction because we tried forcing rocks through glass."

"Alright," Athelstan replied. He put a hand up and let the remaining portion of his stone energy flow through his palm and into the lens. The lens magnified and charged the energy as it flowed through and onto the gemstone. An astral clone of Rosalina appeared before them and watched the purification of the stone element. Within a handful of moments, the corruption of stone was reversed and the Stone Gemstone gave off a reassuring sign. However, the landscape had not reverted back to its original form like it was supposed to.

"Very well done, all of you," said Rosalina. "Unfortunately, even though this shrine is purified, it hasn't done anything to undo the damage here or the dimensional rift."

"So this place is going to remain like this forever?" Daisy asked.

"It appears so," Rosalina replied. "The fusion of this area with the Dimension of the Lost seems to have placed this region in a space independent of the world around it. We should leave here as soon as possible, while we still can. There's no telling what kinds of other special properties this place will develop as a result of what has happened here."

"Well, this place is really not a great vacation spot now!" Marut said with his arms behind his head.

"This is forbidden territory from now on," said Bowser. "When our mission is done, we'll have to inform the public that they should avoid this area."

"It is likely that eventually, this realm will break off from our reality and expand into a new dimension altogether," said Rosalina. "If that happens, the Stone Shrine will follow as well, meaning that anyone

who wants to come to the shrine for whatever reason will have to travel between dimensions. But we cannot be concerned with the state of this region; you must continue with your quest."

"Should we be concerned about the souls that exited through the portal earlier?" asked Athelstan.

"No; they have not been spotted around the world anywhere," Rosalina replied. "We cannot conclude where those spirits have gone or why they were transported."

"Elkon must've gathered them somewhere to do something," said Bowser.

"Whatever the case may be, you all must head to the Earth Shrine next," said the Elder of the Cosmos. "I've sensed that the dark figure now known as Elkon is heading in that direction, and it is also the nearest shrine from here. Head east from this point to the town surrounded by evergreen marshes. The shrine will be in the outskirts just to the north of the town of Maralah. It will take about five hours to get there. And do watch for any signs of the corruption of the earth element."

Chapter VIII

The Southernmost East :

Bowser's Offroader pulled just into the outskirts of the town of Maralah with the koopa himself at the steering wheel as the evening hours began to wane down into the night. They had set out for the town as soon as they had finished their business at the Stone Shrine. The community looked like a typical southern-style urban-suburban setting built to accommodate the area's humidity and surrounding marshy areas. The pleasant look of the area was a much needed break from the distorted land they had traversed through earlier. As the night sky began to take over, the five elemental fighters knew they needed to get some much needed rest for the night. Bowser was mostly fine, Daisy was near fresh besides the arm that had still not fully healed yet, and Marut was relatively okay. Athelstan and Warra however, were both effectively trashed. Athelstan's whole body was throbbing, and Warra had only just returned to consciousness. That meant the next shrine guardian would likely be left to either Bowser, Marut, or Daisy.

"That was a risky move trying to use a water technique like that in a stone environment," said Bowser. "You're lucky you didn't miss..."

"I did what I had to," said Warra. "The fight had to be finished quick before Marut and I became too fatigued to keep up with those two undead beings."

"You gambled," Bowser corrected.

"I had to gamble," Warra said with a smile. "But I knew somebody would've stepped in if it looked like I was done for."

"Definitely," Daisy said with a thumbs up. Referring to Marut, she added, "But this guy beat me to it." The air wielder grinned in response.

"So where are we going, exactly?" Warra asked.

"You were unconscious when we had this arranged," Bowser began. "After we left the Stone Shrine, Rosalina contacted the mayor of this town and asked permission for us to take up residence for the night with him in Maralah's City Hall."

"Who's the mayor?" the water wielder asked.

"She didn't say, but she said it would be somebody Daisy and I would know," answered Bowser. "Just keep our eyes open for whatever might look like a city hall."

"So what do you guys call yourselves?" asked Marut.

"Uh, what do you mean?" Warra questioned for clarification.

"I mean, what's the awesome team name that you all came up for yourselves?" said Marut. "You did come up with one right? If not, I got an idea!"

"Who invited this spaz?" Bowser muttered.

"Destiny," Warra replied.

"C'mon you guys!" Marut playfully urged. "When somebody asks who we are, what are we supposed to tell 'em? 'Oh, we're the elemental warriors chosen by destiny to save nature from world-devastating corruption' is not something I wanna have to be saying every single time!"

"So you can just not answer them," Bowser replied.

"Brutally effective," Warra commented.

"How about, the 'Moirai Five?' " said Marut.

"How did you come up with that one?" Athelstan asked.

"It's from Greek mythology!" answered Marut. "My uncle was big on it! The Moirai were beings known as the incarnations of destiny. Since we are all the elemental fighters chosen by destiny to stop the corruption of the elements, it's a perfect name for us! We'll each be a Moirai!"

"Okay, so what happens when the remaining three join our ranks?" Bowser asked.

"Then, when we're all together, we'll be the Moirai Eight!" Marut said as-a-matter-of-factly.

"I like it!" said Daisy. "It has a nice ring to it."

"You know what, that's not a bad idea at all," Athelstan agreed. "Although I think just 'Moirai' would work fine."

"Most definitely," said Warra. "What do you say, Bowser?"

"Yeah sure, whatever," Bowser said, nonchalant.

"Hey, I think I see the city hall coming up on the right!" said Marut.

The great mayoral building came into view, three stories high and fourteen windows wide. Engraved in a banner above the doorway was "Maralah City Hall" in big bold letters.

"Do you think that's it?" Daisy scoffingly asked.

"I don't know," said Athelstan. "I need another hint."

Bowser drove into the driveway loop and parked the Offroader. All five elemental wielders got out of the truck and saw a man had been standing at the base of the doorsteps in wait. The long and stringy man – borderline malnourished, but surprisingly not sick at all – walked over, wearing a purple suit with royal blue stripes and white pants with yellow leather shoes. But judging by the look on Daisy and Bowser's faces, the cap on the mayor's head was all they needed to see to understand what Rosalina meant.

"AHHH, yeah! How are you all doing?" Waluigi asked. "Welcome! Welcome!"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Bowser asked in surprise. "Where's the mayor?!"

"I'm right here, ya know!" Waluigi answered.

"Unbelievable – this is what you do when you're not competing at Mushroom Kingdom?!" Daisy asked, a dumbfounded look on her face.

"What'd ya think I did?" said the wiry mayor while fiddling with his mustache. "Sit around and wait for the next kingdom-wide party or strikers tournament?"

"I'm speechless..." a wide-eyed Daisy mumbled.

"I'm speechless too..." an equally wide-eyed Bowser muttered.

"I don't get it; you know this guy, so why are you two so surprised?" asked Athelstan.

"How is he alive?!" Warra asked with astonishment. "He's so thin!"

"This guy's cooooool! High five dude!" Marut yelled, slapping hands with Waluigi.

"C'mon inside! C'mon in!" Waluigi urged. "I can see I'm housing some very important people for tonight! What an honor!"

The Mayor of Maralah led them into the city hall building. They went into the large vestibule with an eighteen-chair table and an extra widescreen TV mounted on the wall overhead of a collection of art pieces and landmark doctrines. Overall, the complex looked to exceed many architectural standards.

"Allow my bartenders to bring you some refreshments!" Waluigi offered. "You all must be famished from the surreal battles you've been fighting! I had some prepared in anticipation of your arrival!" The mayor buzzed in for the services. Two toads, a Monty Mole and a Waddle Dee brought in four extra large platters and spread them out along the table – two platters full of assorted meats, one with assorted vegetables, and one with breads and cheeses.

"Alright! Grub!" Daisy and Marut shouted in unison. They wasted no time heading for the platters.

"Well, somebody's hungry!" Athelstan observed. "Or rather, somebodies!"

"Check your grammar," said Bowser.

"What? It was right, wasn't it?" Athelstan asked.

"A nice meal does seem pretty good right about now," said Warra, grabbing a piece of blue cheese.

"Marut! You need to try this fish and beef combo!" shouted Daisy.

"Good to see you're enjoying the food!" said Mayor Waluigi. "Of course, Daisy, you're probably enjoying it even more since the one who lost to you in the 2009 Striker Finals last year is serving you. Don't think I forgot about that little spin deke move your Dry Bones teammate pulled to sneak that last minute goal in..."

"Hah! You better not forget!" Daisy yelled between bites. "You tripped on your own feet trying to turn around and catch him! But it was a great game nonetheless. I had to count the areas of my skin that *weren't* bruised!"

"You can count on me being in the finals again this year," Waluigi haughtily declared. "But you guys have to make sure that the world doesn't fold in on itself!"

"You bet!" Daisy assured. "I guarantee it!"

"You should – for your lack of manners, the both of you," said Warra.

"But FOOD!" Marut exclaimed.

"And we haven't eaten anything since this morning!" Daisy added.

"A princess with an appetite!" said Waluigi. "At this pace I might have to have my bartenders prepare more!"

"Princess?" Warra asked. "I have not seen her act like a princess at all in the two days I've known her."

Daisy swallowed and stopped eating for just a moment to make sure she could talk clearly. "I never considered myself a princess in the first place; that was just in my job title, but since I haven't been to Sarasaland since I was seventeen, I can't really call myself a princess anyways even if I wanted to. And I don't want to."

Bowser thought back to what Daisy had said the night before. *To reject a royal title, to not return home for five years, you had to have been through a lot more than you've said or have been leading on* , he said in his mind. "So what's Wario been up to?" he then asked the mayor.

"Oh, he just recently expanded his WarioWare Inc. company," said Waluigi. "He'll enjoy going on expeditions every so often to exotic places to fuel his treasure collecting. He's relishing the good life at the top of the food chain as the CEO of a dominant video gaming business."

"That figures," Bowser replied with a laugh. "That glutton is probably rubbing it in our faces as we speak!"

"Waddle Dee!" Waluigi called out, referring to the small, round, and puffy bartenders. "Send in another order of everything that we had prepared for our guests."

"Waddle Dee?" asked Athelstan. "Is that what these little shrimps are called?"

"No, I finished the shrimp already!" Marut shouted.

"The Waddle Dees? Oh they're actually a whole separate race of beings," Waluigi answered. "They're from...well, I forget where they're from, but a portion of their people migrated here from their original homeland. They get along with the toads quite well!"

"Everything about this place is awesome!" hollered Marut.

"Yes, well, we do sorta have a situation here," said Bowser, alluding to the mounting crisis.

"Right, back to reality, of course," the mayor replied.

"So what can you tell us about what's been happening locally?" Warra asked.

"Oh yeah, it's been crazy around here for a little while now," said Mayor Waluigi. "Intermittent bouts of rumbling all throughout the town, some barely noticeable, others eerily close to being actual earthquakes...and the frequency of it has been on the rise with each passing day. It's like the very ground itself is ready to collapse and bring everyone and everything down with it."

"So it's only a matter of time before that big one comes and flattens Maralah," said Daisy. "We need to get to the Earth Shrine."

"From what I understand, and from what Rosalina has told us, the Earth Shrine is somewhere north of here," stated Athelstan.

Waluigi nodded. "The Earth Shrine is relatively close to the city here – about five miles from here to be as precise as I can be. However, the land it lies in is not traversable by vehicle. It's a very dense forest with a lot of uneven land and large and numerous patches of marsh. To the south, there's a large swamp, but you don't need to be concerned about dealing with that because the shrine is to the north of here; so that's how you would know you're in the wrong spot. Pretty much nobody goes through the marshes there or near the Earth Shrine because a law as old as this town prohibits trespassers – the land has been set aside for natural preservation, ya know? But I'll allow you guys to go there just this once since you're on an important mission."

"Gee, thanks," Daisy said, sarcasm evident.

"That means we'll need to keep the truck in town here," said Bowser. "We have to set out for the shrine on foot."

"It'll definitely be safe here," Waluigi assured. "We have a very secure parking garage – I can have security escort it inside for you." Two more Waddle Dees and three more Monty Moles then brought in the extra five platters, each duplicates of the original five.

"This is some good nourishment mayor!" Athelstan said. He took a bite of a sandwich he made with the available provolone, cheddar,

whole wheat bread, cabbage, and beef chunks.

"Thanks for the chow, bro!" said Marut.

"We really appreciate it!" added Daisy.

"I can tell!" said Waluigi. "Eat to satisfaction!"

"You sure are in a better mood since the last time we saw you," said Bowser.

Waluigi laughed. "What can I say? Things have been going splendidly for both myself and Maralah! I'm counting on you guys to make it stay that way! Or else...well, let's not think about any of that now, huh?! Now, the guest rooms are upstairs on the second floor. There are six already prepared and waiting whenever you're ready to retire. Please, eat and replenish your energy and fortify your body! You'll need every little bit that can help you on your quest. I'll leave you to your meal while I go and take care of some important business paperwork concerning our economic relationship with the Beanbean Kingdom. If you need anything, you can ask my bartenders and attendants. We'll talk more tomorrow!" The Mayor of Maralah walked out of the room, leaving the five elemental wielders to enjoy their food.

The calm night added to the pleasant respite from the events of earlier in the day. The brisk breeze that accompanied the violet sky created a comfort that made the town delightfully cool. Half past midnight, the vast majority of Maralah was asleep. The City Hall's lights were out, and its inhabitants were all in bed getting their much-needed slumber. Or rather, most of them were. Daisy was awake, sitting up in the bed of the room she was staying in. She looked thoroughly depressed and haunted, not so much on the outside as she was on the inside. Once again, deafening silence haunted her, broken up by the occasional breeze but persistent nonetheless. For a second, she felt either the silence or her thoughts would kill her. The knocking at her door was a very welcome call back to reality.

"Come in," said Daisy. The door opened and Marut sleepily walked

in. "Marut? What are you doing up?"

"I'm still having dreams about getting ripped apart by a tornado," Marut replied. "Man, I thought that since I was here now, those dreams would've stopped."

"I know," said Daisy. "But they're here to stay until your element has been restored to its natural order." She gestured to a chair. "You can sit down if you want. I don't mind the company. I'm actually pretty lonely right about now."

Marut took the chair and sat down in it backwards with his head on his propped up arms. "You know, it's pretty cool how you're a girl and all but you almost never act like one. Like, I feel like I could call you 'bro,' and you'd actually like it."

"Thanks," said Daisy. "But I'm just being me."

"So where exactly did you come from again?" Marut asked.

"Sarasaland... You've probably never heard of it-"

"I have! That heavily forested place with a bunch of bamboo and the desert on its west side and those islands off the coast with those giant head-stone...things!"

Daisy looked surprised. "Wow, so you do know about it then! What made you ask?"

"I wanted to ask you about what you meant earlier about not wanting to be a princess and all," Marut said. "I mean, you would be royalty – Princess of Sarasaland – and yet you didn't want that? I'm sorry if I'm being nosy, but I'm just curious 'cause I never thought anyone would turn down something like that!"

"It was not something I ever wanted, not as long as I can remember," Daisy replied. "To put it bluntly, we're not exactly given a choice where, when, or how we're born into this life. So we take what we are given, but it's up to us to make the necessary changes. Just because you're born into something, doesn't mean that your life is automatically decided. That's something my parents never understood. But it looks like that's something you've never had to

deal with, right?"

"I don't know," Marut innocently answered with a smile and shoulder shrug. "I was an orphan since I was born, so I can't really say."

"Oh," Daisy responded with surprise. "I'm sorry, I didn't know-"

"It's fine," said Marut. "My dad died from cancer a few years before he turned thirty, and my mom died conceiving me. So I never got to meet either of my parents. But it's okay, because on one hand, at least I never had to watch them die, or know that they were dying. It was still tough every now and then, but it's okay. I had my uncle there with me, my mom's brother. I had a lotta help from him to get me through. He always says I look like I'm from some eastern cartoon, but I never got what he meant."

"That's really something," said Daisy with a subtle smile.

"What?"

"You're just so bright and cheery. I try to be like that sometimes, but it just never feels right. It'll never be natural for me to be like that. Or, maybe it's supposed to, but...I don't know. There's just too much I've gone through in the past, and I almost always have my past on my mind. But I can empathize with you not having any parents."

"You can?" Marut asked.

Daisy nodded. She stood up from her bed and walked over to look out the window and get a view of the sleeping city. "My parents and I did not get along very well at all. It always felt like the only reason they raised me was because I was their daughter and heir to their kingdom. I always spent as much time as I could away from them and with my earth teacher, Master Terran..."

Master Terran clapped his hands in applause. "Your use of the earth element is profoundly passionate! You're manipulating the earth as if it were your own emotion, your own self..."

Daisy stood in the middle of the training field, breathing heavily. "I

can do more!" she yelled. She proceeded to gather up earth elementals and conjured a sphere of earth, then swiftly hurled the sphere high into the air without looking where she fired it. Then, she charged her left hand with seismic energy and used her senses to figure out where she launched the mass and to anticipate where it would be next. Daisy picked her location and fired her blast of seismic energy, striking the mass dead on and causing it to crumble in midair.

Master Terran clapped again. "Very well done!" He was a tall and well-built man in his mid-twenties with silver training pants and a black shirt underneath a silver and orange jacket. His short and spiky black hair was a prominent feature of his, and he proudly displayed the earth symbol on the upper-left portion of his jacket.

Daisy began growling and building up more energy. Terran noticed this mounting frustration with his student, and his smile faded. After a little while, Daisy then slammed her fist into the ground and screamed in anger.

"What's wrong, Daisy?" Terran gently asked.

"It's my parents again!" Daisy shouted.

Master Terran's face grew sullen. "Oh, I see. What was it this time?"

Daisy's face reddened. "I'm getting so sick of them! I don't get to have any friends at all! Whenever I meet someone cool, they just pull me away saying I have 'political duties' I gotta attend to! That's always their excuse! When I wanted to run track for school, that's what they said. When I wanted to join the weightlifting team, that's what they said. When I wanted to play baseball, that's what they said! I can't do anything that I want and they do nothing but put me down!" At the end of her statement, Daisy channeled all her mounting rage through her fists into seismic energy and let loose a soulful, echoing yell from the very bottom of her spirit, simultaneously allowing the energy rumble skyward from her hands. It was by far the single largest display of power Terran had ever seen from his pupil. By the end of it, she had collapsed in fatigue and in tears.

Terran walked over to comfort his trainee. "Daisy, don't ever let what your parents do or say reflect on who you are as a person or take away from your confidence and self-worth. You're special."

"You think so?" she whimpered.

"I know so!" he assured. "After all, you're only twelve years old, and yet you've been one of my most proficient students to date. You know, you might be one of the few people that may be capable of manipulating earth into crystal. You actually remind me of myself when I was your age."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah, definitely," said Terran.

Daisy then began to calm down. She was still flustered, but not to the point of blind anger.

"You are special in so many ways," said Terran. "You derive a lot of power from your emotions. They're the key to your true potential. In fact, if you were in a situation where you needed a lot of energy but were completely out of it, you'd be able to run on your emotions and will power alone! You have a heart that mimics the earth we stand on; one of purity and wholeness. And on top of that, your fiery will has also took on the tremendous endurance of earth. All that combined makes you unstoppable! And all that will make you a truly successful person in whatever you endeavor to do – not what your parents force upon you!"

"It's really tough..." Daisy muttered, trying to clear her eyes.

"But you have the guts and the determination to pull through anything," Terran said. "Don't worry one bit, because one day, your parents will be able to see you for who you really are!"

"Okay," Daisy answered with a sniffle.

Terran looked into Daisy's eyes. "And if there's anything you remember from our time together, along with having honor and respect at all times for all people, especially your opponents, remember this: If at any point you're in a really rough patch, know

that you can get through it, no matter what it takes."

After a brief moment, Daisy nodded and then finally smiled. "Yeah...alright! Thanks, Master Terran! You're the greatest!"

Terran smiled. "Of course! I don't like seeing you so upset. After all, you're my child prodigy..."

"...My master was my real family," said Daisy. "Not my mother. Definitely not my father. My father dealt me off to Tatanga when I was seventeen in exchange for the safety and well-being of the kingdom of Sarasaland. His excuse was that my natural energy was abnormally high and Tatanga wanted to harvest it to assist in powering the cities of his planet. I mean, I get that he was just trying to preserve the integrity of his kingdom, I guess, but just knowing that my own father was willing to sacrifice me, his only child... I've had issues trusting everyone since. I had already had issues trusting people before then. Master Terran was the only one I could trust. Even those I know, the little bit of trust I keep with them is very shallow..."

"So what happened to Master Terran?" Marut asked.

Daisy paused for a long while with a blank expression on her face, allowing the deafening silence to momentarily return to the room before saying, "I don't know."

"It's cruel how the world works sometimes," said Warra, who had been standing in the doorway listening to Daisy's brief flashback.

"What are you doing up, Warra?" Daisy asked.

"Oh, you know, I'm just getting a little fed up with dreams where I'm drowning myself," Warra answered. "Nothing much."

"So you heard all that then," said Daisy.

Warra nodded. "I heard, and I understand. But, please understand when I say this..." He walked into the room and locked eye contact with her to subconsciously let her know that what he was about to

say was of importance. When he spoke, he spoke softly, slowly, and without hesitation. "Daisy, I know it must be hard for you to trust anyone what with everything that's happened before, but, we're not going to demand that you trust us. We're going to tell you so that you know that you can always trust us no matter what. That's a promise, and we're also going to tell you that you don't have to trust us at all or even believe us. Just know that you *can* if you choose to."

Marut couldn't think of anything good to say. So instead of flustering about for words that may well make no sense, he gave Daisy a goofy but reassuring smile.

"And that goes for us too," said Bowser with crossed arms. Athelstan stood right beside him.

"Don't tell me you guys were up too!" said Warra. "What are you doing awake?"

"Trying to come up with a plan of action," replied Bowser, stepping inside. "We were actually outside discussing with Rosalina through one of her astral clones, but we heard a bunch of talking up here so we decided to check it out. With the town as quiet as it is at this time of night, it's not hard to discern the sound of people's voices."

Athelstan stepped into the room. "After we've liberated the Earth Shrine, we'll travel north to the northeastern part of the continent and take care of the Water Shrine, then we'll sweep down back towards the north-central region and deal with the Air Shrine. The Ice Shrine will be next, located at the tip of the northwest. Then from there, we can travel along the northern border of the continent and head to the Light Shrine and Shadow Shrine since they're relatively close to each other."

"Then we can deal with Elkon," Bowser finished.

"Unless we deal with him before then!" Marut added.

"We'll see," said Bowser. "This is just a rough outline. Things could change as we go depending on what happens." He gave a nod to Daisy, referencing what she had said earlier in the day.

"Let's bring our hands in and swear an honorary pledge," Athelstan suggested. "Make this allegiance of ours official!"

"Not a bad idea at all; Daisy, would you like to do the honors?" asked Warra.

Daisy perked up, and, with a slight grin in her expression, said, "Definitely."

"This is awesome!" Marut hollered.

"Yes," the Koopa King agreed. "Yes it is."

All five gathered and stood in a circle. They made their right hands into fists and put them in the center of their shape, at which point Daisy began to speak. "No matter what it takes, we will pull through and achieve our goal as a team. We will restore the nature of the elements to their former states, and we will do everything we can to prevent the destruction of this world and defeat Elkon to return order and justice to the land. And we will do so with honor and respect for our fellow man. We have the power, and the pressure is all on us. Now let's all make a solemn vow, the most important vow we've ever made in our lives – a vow to win."

"Cause we're the Moirai!" Marut cheered.

"The incarnations of destiny," Daisy finished. The five Moirai bowed their hands once and then disbanded the circle.

"Alright; now would be the time to get some sleep," said Bowser. "All of us."

"Right," said Daisy. "We've got a lot to do and a long road ahead, so let's all try to get some rest. And...guys...thank you."

"Hey, we got a job we need to do," Warra replied. "And we need everybody!"

"More importantly, we're a team, and a team's gotta look out for each other!" Athelstan exclaimed.

"We got each others' backs, bros!" Marut guaranteed. "Adventure

awaits!"

Bowser gave a thumbs up, and with that, he, Warra, Athelstan, and Marut all left the room. Daisy got back in bed and laid there, her head staring at the ceiling. Even with the reassuring words from her teammates, she knew she would be unable to get any sort of restful sleep, once again dealing with the dreams of her own demise by earth. It took her a while to finally drift into slumber. And again, just as he was the night prior, her father, the one person in the entire world she never wanted to see again, was in her dreams high overhead on a balcony overlooking her destruction. He sat there, nonchalantly watching his only child's death.

The sooner we purify the Earth Shrine the better , she thought. *But that doesn't mean you're going to go away, does it?*

Chapter IX

Tremors :

It was near high noon the next day when the Moirai were trekking through the nature preserve encircling Maralah in search of the Earth Shrine. Following the instructions Waluigi had given them before their departure, they made their way through a thick swamp and then across the tree tops to avoid a chasm that had just recently been created as a result of the elemental disturbances. The marshy forest had been almost entirely vacant and eerily quiet, as if all the creatures had ran away in anticipation of some cataclysmic event. Waluigi himself had not been in nearly the same kind of gleeful and ecstatic mood that he was in the night prior.

"Why are you guys leaving so late?!" the Mayor of Maralah had demanded to know. "It's half past ten in the morning already! I thought you would've been gone by now!"

"You try sleeping through lifelike nightmares that invoke every last one of your waking body's senses," Warra had replied.

"Right, sorry," Waluigi had said. "To be dreadfully honest, I'm a bit petrified from the threat of my town being wrecked. It's been like that for a while now. I'll wake up in the morning anxious as a dog waiting to be fed and I won't calm down until after midday. I've invested a whole lot into this town, ya know; I treat it like a child that I fed and raised, that I nurtured and taught how to ride a bike and then watched as he took it and learned how to fly an airplane."

"Grow a pair, Waluigi," Bowser had flatly said.

The area to the north of town was just as Waluigi had described. The land was lined with dense, thick forestry and scattered areas of marsh, and the uneven ground required extra attention to avoid tripping. With the sun essentially directly overhead, beams of light were shining through the forest trees and scattered about by the leaves hanging high above. It would have been a peaceful and surreal setting had there not been the threat of impending doom

looming over the land. The five elemental wielders walked cautiously along their route, aware that a tremor could strike at any moment. They had already experienced one earlier in the morning, though luckily it was not powerful enough to cause any noticeable structural damage anywhere in town.

Daisy stuck at the head of the group, Bowser and Warra offset to the left and right respectively of the middle and Athelstan and Marut both at the rear end. They were getting close to where the Earth Shine was supposed to be. When they had traveled a little further on, Daisy motioned Bowser to the front of the group to question him about something without input from the rest of the Moirai.

"Between you and me, what kind of technology did the Toadstool family use in their invasion all those years ago?" asked the earth wielder.

"I don't remember," said Bowser.

"C'mon, you've got to remember!" Daisy urged.

"I don't know," said Bowser, frustrated.

"You have to know!" exclaimed Daisy. "Or do you not want to remember? I understand that those are bad and painful memories but, you need to think back just this once..." She paused for a moment before adding on to her request. "I need to know, to confirm a suspicion of mine. Please."

Bowser didn't say anything for a while, but then decided to try and delve into his memories for the information Daisy wanted. She stayed silent and waited for an answer.

"Yes! That's it!" said Bowser. "Peach walked in with some sort of ice blaster, and her soldiers had ice-based melee weapons, and I remember that it was bitterly cold when they attacked – it was like they knew that we were a fire-based race and preyed upon our susceptibility to ice!"

Daisy nodded. "That's very close to what I thought." She gave Bowser a reassuring smile. "Thank you for your effort."

Just then, their travel was brought to a halt. A rumble ensued, a tremor that an untrained pedestrian would've been toppled by. The Moirai held their ground in the midst of what felt like an earthquake, but just as it was about to turn into a full-scale convulsion of national proportions, it quickly cut off, and stability returned.

"That didn't feel good at all," said Athelstan.

"Reminded me of a carnival ride," said Marut.

"A carnival ride gone wrong, you mean," Bowser corrected.

"Daisy, can you use your earth awareness to sense exactly what's going on underground?" Warra asked.

"I've never done that before but I can try," the Moirai of Earth responded. She knelt down and placed her hand on the ground, then closed her eyes and attempted to sync her energies with the seismic activity occurring below the surface. The arch in her eyebrows increased from the added concentration. Soon, she was able to take note of each vibration, tremor, and disturbance as if it were her own body. After a few more moments, she stood up, her eyes still closed.

"Well?" Bowser asked.

Daisy clenched her jaw a bit. "There's a lot happening down there; it's kinda calm up here, but I sensed a helluva lot happening underneath us. It's absolutely mad down there. There's no doubt in my mind that something massive is in the works. If I had to take a guess, I'd say we have about four hours before that disturbance surfaces, and when it does, I'd say everything within a radius of a hundred and twenty miles is annihilated."

"Then let's move," Athelstan said with urgency.

Another half hour of travel brought them to a strange formation. They spotted what appeared to be a wall of tall trees and outrageously thick, overgrown bushes. The wall of plants extended for a while along both sides in a way that resembled an impassable great barrier.

"The Earth Shrine must be on the other side of these trees," Bowser thought aloud. "But we'll have to find a way around these boundaries."

"We'll just have to walk around it," said Warra. "I'm assuming there's some sort of entrance around here somewhere. Obviously there must be something very important around here to warrant there being a giant barrier of plantlife."

"We'll split up then," said Daisy. "Marut and I can go left, and the rest of you can go right. If you find anything, just send an elemental blast or a blast of standard energy up into the air in our direction, and we'll do the same if we find anything."

Daisy and Marut went left along the wall of trees and bushes, and Bowser, Warra, and Athelstan went to the right. Neither parties were able to see anything for a good ten minutes or so, until Daisy and Marut caught sight of a bolt of water shot high in the sky. They reversed their direction and darted along the tree wall until they regrouped with their teammates. What the fighters in red, blue, and brown saw was a doorway to what looked like a tunnel covered in overgrowth. Marut brought in a gust of air to clear the foliage and revealed that the makeshift door frame had the same earth emblem on top of it that was on the back of Daisy's shirt.

"No doubt; the Earth Shrine is within this tunnel," said Daisy. "I know that emblem by heart. We'll probably be going underground."

"Oh, that's just great..." Marut grumbled.

"If I can go in the desert, you can go underground, Marut," said Warra.

They walked down through the tunnel and the four flights of stairs lined with purple and blue lightstones along the walls contained within. A magnificent sight awaited them at the end of the tunnel. The Earth Shrine made up a collection of caverns three stories underground with open ceilings, meaning the sun shined down into it just as it shined through the forest. A creek cut underneath and ran through several portions of the complex, and bridges were available for passage over the areas the creek ran over. The cavern walls

were golden and glistening in the sunlight. But as their instincts had been telling them all day long, it was all a deceptive beauty to lull them into a false sense of security.

The Moirai wasted no time maneuvering through the bridges and sections of caverns that made up the interior of the shrine. But trying to get through this shrine was noticeably more tricky than the previous two. It was almost like going through a labyrinth because the caverns looked so similar. In one particular cavern room however, Daisy dropped to the floor to stare at a large plot of brightly colored purple and white flowers.

"Why did you stop to look at some damn plants?!" Bowser yelled.

"This is a grove of lisianthus flowers!" Daisy shouted with joy. "A whole grove here! Do you know how hard it is to find these?!"

"We can't worry about flowers now – we need to look for the door to the gemstone room!" the Moirai of Fire exclaimed.

"Guys, this is the door here," said Marut.

A few yards past the lisianthus flowers was the door in question. The door appeared to be bolted shut all the way around by a mixture of hardened sediments and minerals. There was no vent nor was there any handle or doorknob. One could easily walk past the door thinking it was just a wall with a different design if they didn't notice the hinges – except the hinges did not appear functional at all.

"Good eye, Marut," said Athelstan.

"See?" Daisy retorted. "Good thing I stopped for these so-called 'damn plants.' "

"Your move, Daisy," said Warra.

Since the door did not appear to be able to open by any sort of mechanical means, Daisy decided she would need to bust the door down. The earth wielder came to the conclusion that this would need a very special attack; she gathered earth elementals into the palm of her left hand, creating a larger hand around hers made entirely of earth. She then took it one step further by making a fist and

crystallizing it. Her signature Crystal Fist was ready, a technique with brutish attack power. She took four steps back, then leapt at the door, striking it with her fist and causing it to shake and collapse inwards. The five Moirai quickly emerged from the entryway as the door slammed onto the ground and kicked-up dust.

"Direct approach... I like it," said Athelstan.

"Would you have known me to do it any other way," Daisy said with pride. "And look who's waiting for us."

The gemstone room was an arena noticeably larger than the Stone Shrine's plateau and the Fire Shrine's crater. The caverns seemed to be the most colorful ones out of the whole structure, with green moss and vines growing along the bottoms of some of the walls. The sun was able to shine light down on every area of the grand room, but everyone's attention was drawn to the space just above the gemstone pedestal in the back of the room. Elkon was levitating in the air, looking like he had been waiting in anticipation of their arrival.

"You are all anachronisms – striving for what you think is right and just in a vile world of chaos and disorder rife with suffering and pain," Elkon boasted with the same cool, deep voice he always had.

"There you go again running your mouth instead of fighting," Daisy smugly said.

"I am getting tired of your incessant mouth, child," muttered Elkon. "I was certain Necromancer and Necropaladin would've wiped you all out, but instead, you're all here and there's one extra."

"Go figure," said Daisy.

"Next time, don't try to kill us with walking wet toilet paper," said Bowser.

"Why do you continue to oppose what I'm doing? What do you hope to accomplish?" Elkon asked the Moirai.

"We're going to put a stop to you and your misanthropic intentions, that's what," answered Warra.

"We're going to restore order and balance to the nature that you've corrupted and tempered with!" Daisy added.

"Oh, I see," Elkon began to say. "That does sound...noble of you. Even if only so very minute. I applaud you for your efforts to 'restore order and balance.' But you are oblivious to the unbiased truth of reality. The tempering I've done, is no different than the tempering you humans have done."

"What do you mean?" Athelstan asked.

Elkon focused his voice. "I will recite again the phrase earlier from the ancient scriptures of the Stone Shrine; Let stone be the world's mold. Let earth be the harbinger of life. Let fire bring heat to the land. Let water nourish the surroundings. Let air inspire motivation and freedom. Let ice instill cold and preservation. Let light be the energy to all. Let shadow bring relaxation and rest." He narrowed his eyes. "That is the purpose of each element. That is what each element was brought into being for. That is the true form of nature; construction and advancement...but somewhere along the lines, you humans decided to implement nature into your warfare. You humans, decided that nature's true form is destruction and devolution."

Daisy did not back down, but did not say anything either. Her suspicions were beginning to unfold in front of her.

Elkon gazed at Daisy. "I see you've grown quiet. Yes...your father made extensive use of earthquake causing technologies to trample the towns and nations he overran. Your father had his fair share of involvement in all the violence that so many were forced to endure."

"What are you saying?" Daisy asked. "My father was the King of Sarasaland! The whole kingdom looked upon him as the bringer of peace! He did *anything* he could to keep Sarasaland safe! You had me for a moment there, but now I can see you're just straight lying!"

"You don't know anything about your father and yet you accuse me of lying," Elkon thought aloud. "I speak the truth. I've spoken nothing but the truth since the beginning. It's your choice to believe my words – stay in ignorance if you'd like."

Daisy had no response, only able to clench her teeth and cringe. *Now what* , she thought. *More reason to hate my father? How much do you know, Elkon? ...Who are you?*

Elkon turned his eyes to Bowser. "How does it feel, mighty king, to have your own people slaughtered by elemental warfare? To have the very thing that helped bring you into being also cause the destruction of your Koopa Clan? To have nature be turned upon you in such a gruesome way?"

Without notice, Bowser conjured a fireball and hurled it at Elkon in under a second. Out of nowhere, a dimensional portal appeared right in front of the dark fiend to catch the fireball. Both the portal and the fireball then disappeared just as quickly as they came. Everyone who wasn't Elkon was absolutely taken aback.

Elkon paused for a moment before sighing and concluding, "It apparently doesn't matter to you either."

Bowser growled. "Don't dare talk about what matters to me if you value the sick and demented existence that you call your life!"

"You just proved how well you fit in with these humans," Elkon said before returning his sight to the center of the group. "As I was saying, millions of lives have been lost throughout time because of power your race has misused. The more greed, the more lust, the more hatred within one person...the more destruction, the more death, and the more pain is created; all in an effort to gain as much power and control as he or she can handle...and then some. No matter who or how many die...no matter how much is obliterated...the means to the end does not matter, as long as that domination is achieved. The elements were already thoroughly tainted long before I had anything to do with them. So you see, my so-called, 'corruption' of the elements is nothing at all compared to the corruption that your kind has instituted over the years."

None of the Moirai were able to say anything in response to Elkon's words, but they were all able to come to terms within themselves one way or another that Elkon had not spoke any lies, nor had he made any exaggerations at all. Elemental warfare was rampant across the world, irrespective of whatever situation may be

happening at anytime. There was fighting and war going on somewhere even as they all stood within the Earth Shrine. There was simply no getting around that; humans were abusing nature to further their own interests, and more often than not those interests were not near benevolent enough to justify the kinds of destruction and massacre that typically ensued.

"But you have the power to help usher in the change this world needs," Elkon said to break the silence. "For the good of the world, all you have to do is stand down and leave this place so that I may continue my plans unimpeded."

"I don't quit and I don't run so c'mon and let's settle this now!" Daisy urged with a smile. "Yes, the world is messed up, but I speak for myself and my teammates in saying that we're not going to just yield and let you tear the world apart. You don't like humans? Fine, you don't have to like us at all but is destroying the world really going to solve anything?"

"You simply will never understand what I'm trying to do," Elkon said, removing his hood. He revealed a human face, one of young but very pale complexion in spite of his matured facial shape. He had no facial hair, but the hair of his head was long and the color of a very light blonde. The real striking features however, were the piercing red hue of his irises and the long, thick scar that took up the center of his left cheek. There was no doubt though, that Elkon was at the very least partially human himself.

"Hypocrite of the year," Bowser flatly said. "Human *and* waging war on his own race with his powers. My male-bovine-droppings detector's going berserk over here."

"My powers exist outside of nature, unlike these other humans," Elkon explained. "I was hoping you could've attested to this, Bowser; your Koopa Clan was peacefully thriving before they were mercilessly slaughtered by human forces... But if you choose to side with the killers of your people, then all the more power to you. You will just have to be eradicated alongside them."

"We will allow you to do no such thing!" Daisy declared. "And once we've defeated you, I'll see to it personally that the koopas are

restored to their former status!"

Bowser gasped in surprise. "Daisy..."

"As for your vendetta against the human race, you'll take that up with me!" Daisy shouted. She smiled and pointed her thumb to herself. "Any problem you have against the world is a problem against me!"

"With every statement you make, you're further proving your lack of comprehension of the subject matter," said Elkon. "My goal is not to destroy the world. My goal is to prevent humans from destroying the world."

"What?" Daisy snarled. "You're going to stop humans from destroying the world by destroying the world yourself?"

"Who said anything about destroying any world?" replied Elkon. "My goal is to rid this world of humans with the very same thing they've been using to execute each other with for far too long now. Humans will no longer be able to pick and choose who they want to die; Nature will just kill all humans. Then, once chaotic nature has eradicated the last man, I will reverse the effects I have put on the elements and bring in an everlasting era of the kind of true peace and tranquility that is impossible in a world where mankind exists. The planet and its lifeforms will have to suffer for this to work, but they will only suffer for a little while. It's the necessary evil that must be done to restore justice and order to the lands. The rest of the inhabitants of this world will just have to ride out the impending apocalypse to be able to have their place in the new world. Any collateral damage taken from the human extinction will heal itself in time. Then the world will be able to live in undying harmony thanks to my liberation of the world from your kind."

The expressions on everyone's faces grew somber and grim. No one could come up with a response to Elkon's intentions.

Elkon's tone sharpened as he spoke again. "I gave you the chance to liberate yourselves, to gain redemption by realizing that what I am doing is the change this world needs, by realizing that this is the best possible outcome for this planet. However, you rejected it. The

whole time you have stood here before me, you have done nothing but provide further proof of your kind's evils. You cannot do anything to deter me from my objective; humanity will cease to exist and nature will get its long overdue revenge on mankind. As for you who stand before me now, I have something different in mind for your extermination..."

Elkon replaced the hood over his head and raised his arms out to the side as his eyes began glowing a neon red despite his face being obscured again. A rumble in the shrine erupted, expanding into a violent shaking. The five warriors stood their ground during the ongoing earthly convulsion.

"My being has transcended dimensions to accomplish this task, and I cannot allow you to intervene," Elkon solemnly declared. "Your debts will not be able to go unpaid any longer."

"Is this the big one, Daisy?" Athelstan asked in reference to the earthquake she had sensed was in the making earlier.

"No," said Daisy. "This isn't an earthquake...not at all..."

A section of ground in front of them opened up and gave way to a gigantic mass emerging in blistering light. The mass materialized into a towering biped and rose up out of the parting ground, standing a whole twelve times larger than Bowser. It was a ghastly creature composed of a diverse mixture of sediments, mud, and clay, all encased by pieces of the ground itself. Once the great form fully surfaced, the parted ground miraculously closed back flat. The giant earthen creature opened its yellow eyes and moaned as if it was in immeasurable pain and despair.

Elkon's voice reverberated with exceptionally low tone as he announced the arrival of his great titan. "Behold...The Crestfallen..."

Chapter X

The Crestfallen :

"What is that thing?!" Marut asked.

"It looks like it's caught between life and death," said Athelstan.

Elkon looked on at his bewildering titan with content before addressing the question from Marut. "It is an amalgamation of souls that have been lost through the senseless war of elements. I opened the dimensional rift at the Stone Shrine so that I may enter the Dimension of the Lost and gather all these souls, and the portal I created just before leaving you to deal with Necromancer and Necropaladin was for transporting these souls here where I have fused them all together into this grand entity..."

"You're a mad man..." said Daisy. "Absolutely sick."

Elkon tilted his head up a bit, making his appearance more domineering. "Am I mad? Or perhaps the whole world is mad..."

Daisy growled in an angst of anger at Elkon's words. She clenched her fists as her muscles tensed, ready to spring at the dark fiend.

"Why do you think I wanted to gather these souls?" Elkon continued. "These spirits need to vent their sorrows and pains upon mankind for what it has done both to these spirits and to itself."

"You better start making sense right now!"yelled Athelstan.

"I make all the sense in the world," Elkon assured. "You're the one getting flustered with my intentions. Nobody told you to become involved."

"Destiny did!" Daisy proclaimed, raising a fist up in front of her face. "Like it or not, we're all here for a reason and I'm right behind it if I get to stop you and your insidious actions!"

"Really? Did 'destiny' tell you what you were fighting for?" asked Elkon. "What about what you're fighting for makes it so righteous and destined to protect the interests of those wishing to take advantage of nature itself to gain world power? You're protecting tyrants and dictators, villains and gangs, all who seek to prey upon the young and helpless through abuse of the very nature that gave them life."

"Alright, enough of this," Daisy grunted. Glaring at Elkon, she thrust a fist forward. "For the sake of everyone and everything on this planet, human and non-human, I vow to defeat you! And since this *is* the *Earth* Shrine, I'll be handling this colossus." She cracked her knuckles. "I represent the black and silver of earth! So you better be ready Elkon, because once I've finished this giant off I'm coming after you and ending your madness!"

Instead, Marut jumped out to the front and threw his ninjato at The Crestfallen. A wickedly erratic rotation took over his blade as it scythed through the air, fortified by an updraft he brought in.

"HEY!" Daisy yelled.

"Sorry, but looks like I made the first attack," said Marut. "So it looks like I'll be taking this fight."

"What the... Oh YOU BASTARD!" Daisy shouted in comical anger.

"Meh – all you would've done was throw dirt and jewelry at it anyways," Bowser said.

"I'll throw you at it, ya beanhead!" Daisy snapped back.

The ninjato struck The Crestfallen in its chest but did not seem to harm it at all. That's when Marut dashed ahead and leapt up with his incredible agility right to where the tool was stuck in the giant and slammed it down further into the earthy flesh with his foot. Before descending, he grabbed his weapon and ripped out as the giant being moaned and stumbled backwards. Chunks of its chest fell off, letting loose the sound of moaning souls that had been released as a result of the combined damage.

"Decent aesthetics but I think your necro-guys looked better," Marut said as he eyed the giant lifeform up and down.

"I can see that your confidence is no facade, Daisy," said Elkon. "However, confidence does not automatically guarantee victory in any conflict. And it for sure does not guarantee victory against an embodiment of suffering. Step up and show me how well your confidence fares against the vengeance of over two million innocent souls and counting who have lost their lives at the hands of the countless individuals who used the eight elements for slaughter."

"Two million..." Daisy said under her breath.

"Are you surprised?" Elkon asked. "You shouldn't be. I've only gathered a meager fraction of the total death toll caused by elemental warfare..."

The Crestfallen raised its large arm and slammed it down in the direction of the Moirai, forcing all five of them to scatter in evasion to different areas of the room. The titan keyed-in on Marut and lumbered over in his direction.

"Marut, get back!" Daisy shouted.

The Crestfallen made a small jump and moved its body through the air to try and land on top of the green fighter, though Marut just dashed out of the way. Even with his impressive speed, he still only barely dodged before contact could be made. On landing, The Crestfallen stepped backwards to try and see where Marut had gotten to. Instead, the titan found Daisy standing in front of Marut, her fist up and crackling with seismic energy.

"Marut, you're too fatigued from the battle at the Stone Shrine," Daisy told the panting Moirai of Air. "I need to be fighting here."

"Sorry," Athelstan shouted from the distance. "But I need to make up for my defeat at said shrine. So if you all don't mind-"

"What – sit down!" Daisy yelled. "You're still recovering from yesterday!"

"Yes, Athelstan," said Bowser. "You should let me deal with this

overgrown, hardened play-doh."

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE – HAVEN'T YOU EVER HEARD OF LADIES FIRST?!" Daisy screamed, flailing her arms. That outburst infuriated The Crestfallen and lured the titan towards her. Daisy jumped up and clung to the cavern wall with her right hand using her Crystal Grip ability, her other hand still holding the charge of seismic earth energy, but by that time, The Crestfallen had already gotten close enough to swing its arm around in a massive sweeping motion at the black-clothed fighter. The Moirai of Earth had to cancel her attack and jump up to a higher portion of the wall to avoid getting flattened by the tremendous arm. She then shot back down to the ground before The Crestfallen could make another attack and dashed from point to point to ensure that the titan could not spot her as she gained some distance.

The Crestfallen moaned again, struggling to keep its form stable as it twisted itself around to try and spot the rapidly moving earth wielder. An incoming slash of air made a slice into a portion of The Crestfallen's arm, courtesy of Marut, who refused to hand over the fight to Daisy. Once more, a piece of its body came out, and a handful of souls escaped from the titan's form.

"Marut! Get back now!" Daisy yelled with anger.

"No!" Marut shouted. "I need to fight this thing! Just trust me!"

"What do you mean, 'You need to fight this thing?' " Daisy grumbled.

Marut took his ninjato and began concentrating air around the blade. Rotational forces accumulated around his weapon, forming a vicious funnel of air. Once he thrust the ninjato forward, a horziontal tornado emerged around the blade, extending itself outwards and towards The Crestfallen. The fierce winds did not seem to do anything but stun the giant, but after a few moments, the winds began to slowly eat away at the titan's body.

"Oh, I think I see what he's doing," Bowser said. "Marut recognized the composition of the monster and realized that he'd be able to chip away at the earthen structure with his air abilities!"

"But he's too tired!" Daisy yelled. "This is a very good example of why we can not rely on elemental matchups for these fights! But Marut wasn't around for that conversation, was he?"

"Nope," Athelstan replied. "Neither was I. Quite frankly, I wasn't ever thinking about that."

"No, this has nothing to do with elemental matchups at all," said Warra. "Just look."

Marut took it one step further and laced his horizontal tornado with lightning, the advanced form of air. The lightning boost added further damage to The Crestfallen's form, but the attack only lasted a few more seconds before Marut pulled back and disbanded the twister. He had become too tired to keep up the attack and looked completely gassed.

The Crestfallen moved itself towards Marut, looking to land a solid blow on the fighter. The Moirai of Air took three long lateral leaps and then jumped into the torso of the titan to deliver a swift kick to its abdomen. A few more chunks of its body fell off and a few more souls were heard and seen escaping from the giant. The Crestfallen did not flinch from Marut's kick however, and instead attacked with a kick of its own. Marut blocked with his arms, but there was plenty of force left over to send him hurtling into the cavern wall. The cumulative fatigue prevented him from being able to brace against the collapse, causing Marut to fall unconscious seconds after colliding with the wall. The Crestfallen seemed content with just that, as it was having its own issues to deal with. Several chunks of its body were lost, exposing the yellow light that appeared to be its collective essence.

"Damn it..." Daisy muttered. "Just what I thought; He didn't very last long at all..."

"But now we know how to beat this monstrosity," said Bowser. "We need to keep chipping away at its body, Doing so will do damage to its yellow inside and release more and more of the souls that are giving it life."

"You should give Marut more credit Bowser, once we're finished

here and he's awoken," said Warra. "He figured that out the moment he saw that titan emerge. In fact, he may have very well known that he wouldn't be able to stand against it. And since there was no time to try and explain it to us, he wanted to be the first to fight so he could show us how to beat it. Very instinctual."

"But risky," Bowser added.

"He gave us the template, so let's use it," said Athelstan.

The Crestfallen did not make any further moves. Instead, it curled itself into a ball, glowing and pulling in earth elementals from all around the room. It looked like it intended to fortify its body and replace the pieces of itself that had been knocked off.

"Alright," said Daisy. "I'm up."

"No Daisy, this thing is too large and too fast!" Warra shouted. "Fatigued or not, Marut could not handle it by himself! We must all attack it together!"

"I said I'm up!" Daisy quickly yelled back at the Moirai of Water. "I'm fighting this giant and I'm not going to be able to give it my all with you guys all over the place!" She then cracked a smile. "Not only that, but it's the honorable thing to do – one against one, not four against one!"

"What are you saying? Do you see the size of that thing?" Bowser asked.

"Did you not fight the Flame Behemoth head-to-head at the Fire Shrine?" Daisy asked. "It wasn't that much smaller than this giant, was it? You all have already fought before, and I don't need you all getting in my way here!" Her tone then grew dark. "Or do you all think I'm helpless?"

Warra jumped out and got right in front of Daisy with his arms flared out. "Stop and think about what you're saying for a moment! This thing can easily flatten any of us in an instant!"

Bowser had no response for Daisy. His gaze was focused on The Crestfallen, who had finished up its repair. It was now back to

standing, but seemed to be a little smaller than it was when it was originally summoned. He thought back to what Daisy had told him at his palace, how much emotion she had put into her words, the seriousness in her stare; it was that same steely resolve that she had carried the whole time they've been on this mission, and the same one she had on at this very moment.

"Let Daisy fight it alone, okay?" Bowser finally said to Warra.

"What? Why?" Warra countered. "That makes no sense! This is not a conventional fight! We have to-"

"Just let her do it, okay?"

Warra was silent. He didn't do anything for a few moments, but eventually moved out of Daisy's way. The Moirai of Earth didn't utter a word. Her eyes said all that needed to be said. They gave off the kind of glow that guaranteed that the beholder would not disappoint far more than words could ever express. She gave a short look to Bowser, Athelstan, and Warra each in turn before darting to the center of the vast room to confront The Crestfallen. All three of them got the message, and watched Daisy come to a stop a good distance away from the titan.

"Bowser, I don't understand why you allowed that," Warra said, sobering in tone.

Bowser kept his gaze on Daisy when he responded. "Ever since she was a kid, she's been intent on being as independent as she could. She's always had issues trusting people – and even with what you'd said last night, she still doesn't trust us – so we need to give her more reason to trust us by fully entrusting her with the task of defeating The Crestfallen. And not only that, but from what I've seen, she's a heavily offensive fighter. That means she needs to be on the offense as much as she can, and that also means that she needs to be able to fight and attack unrestrained without having to think about if she's going to be hitting us by accident."

Daisy had an exaggerated forward lean in her attack-oriented stance, one foot forward and the other foot very far back, no guard up whatsoever, relaxed and with a confident smile in her expression.

The Crestfallen lumbered a little closer and came to a halt to set its arms down on the ground. Lost in the whole exchange was the fact that Elkon was still levitating in the air above the room and had been viewing all that had transpired.

Daisy leapt forward at The Crestfallen, full speed, going at the giant with no hesitation. The lumbering titan raised its body up and brought its arms up into the sky as Daisy sped towards it. Once she got close enough, the giant slammed its arms down, making direct contact with both limbs and delivering a smashing hit to the Moirai of Earth. A thundering thud echoed through the air as everything came to a standstill, Daisy appearing to have been crushed to death.

"Not a good start at all," said Athelstan.

"See what I was trying to tell you!" Warra yelled at Bowser. "Daisy's been flattened!"

"Warra," said Bowser with the utmost seriousness in his voice. "Stop being so overprotective."

"What?" Warra asked in startled confusion.

Just then, shafts and mounds of large crystal shot through The Crestfallen's arms. Chunks of its body were pierced and torn away as crystals continued to shoot upwards from underneath. Both of its forearms were sliced through, the massive gashes releasing souls by the hundreds. The Crestfallen pulled back and moaned in ever increasing agony. At the center of the crystal uprising, Daisy stood, unharmed.

"That was her Crystal Smash," said Bowser. "She must've caught and blocked The Crestfallen's arms before they were able to actually crush her, and she used the opportunity she had underneath it to call forth the attack."

"Crystal Smash," Athelstan said. "A technique like that exhausts a lot of energy. Make no mistake; she's considerably powerful."

"You think so, Athelstan?" asked Warra.

"I think, that you two have been underestimating her the whole

time!" said Athelstan. "I've never seen her fight, but when I first met you guys, I noticed that she had this radiant glow about her and a kind of vibrant energy that you don't come across very often!"

Warra did not respond at first. All he could think about was how easily he was able to injure Daisy's arm when he had mistook her for an enemy. The prospect of Daisy being able to take down a titan like The Crestfallen just seemed too overwhelming to him.

"I don't know, it just seems like too much," Warra mumbled.

"I believe in her completely! She'll bring that titan to its knees!" Athelstan cheered.

"I mean, any one of us could have done it too, I'm sure," said Bowser. "But yes, she will."

Daisy devolved the crystals back into standard earth and dashed towards The Crestfallen's right leg. She landed a heavy kick on its calf that sent the giant reeling backwards in a haphazard flip. She then followed that up by jumping up and jamming her elbow into the titan's abdomen. The section that took the attack collapsed inwards and let loose thousands of souls.

The Crestfallen toppled forward and moaned in anguish and torment. Daisy made multiple backflips out of the way to avoid the collapsing giant. It landed on the ground with a crash but wasted no time and began to do the same technique it did earlier to deform and refortify itself with even more earth elementals. Daisy simply stood in wait, seeing that any attack made at this time would just be nullified by the titan's reconstruction. The Crestfallen finished and reemerged in moments, albeit now only eight times larger than Bowser. As expected, the gaps and breaks in its body that exposed its endogenous yellow form were now covered up and repaired, but it had lost a significant portion of the souls it had started out with.

Bowser looked on at what was unfolding. "I'm starting to believe as well," he said. "I joke around a lot, but she just seems to be teeming with hope...and determination...and so far, neither this journey nor even this threatening giant have done anything to dim either one."

Warra didn't say anything at first, but then thought about it for moment before bowing his head in response. "Then I must believe as well. I will go and get Marut."

Daisy charged at The Crestfallen again and leapt up into the air to deliver an uppercut into its torso, but the titan spun around to bat Daisy away and save its abdomen from being reopened. As she shot through the air backwards, she made a quick reverse somersault to regain control of her body and jammed her feet and hands down to put the brakes on her velocity. The earth wielder calluses on her palms protected her hands from the friction. As soon as she stopped, she dashed forward again. This time, she made separate dashes crisscrossing from point to point until she got right underneath The Crestfallen's left leg. As she delivered a leg sweep to its ankle, she encased her leg in earth to give her attack extra strength. The titan's ankle practically became disconnected from its body as a result of the kick and once more, The Crestfallen was upended.

Daisy focused a markedly high amount of energy into her fist and jumped high up into the air. As she reached her apex, she pulled her charged fist back and down as far as possible and aimed for The Crestfallen's back. Once she was about to land on top of the titan, Daisy swung her fist up and around in an arcing overhead punch. The impact of her punch fractured The Crestfallen's entire back, causing tens of thousands more souls to escape from its crumbling earthen encasing. The titan quickly reached around its back with its right arm to grab Daisy and whip her across the battlefield. She crashed into one of the cavern walls far away from the titan and flopped onto the floor.

"Valiant effort, Daisy," Elkon said, breaking his silence. "But you see, this entity is fueled by the suffering and pain of souls too vast in number for you to ever hope of putting an exact count to. Even though many have been released through this battle, a substantial amount still remains within this great earthly form, driving it on. Will you now see the faults in your ways and yield to both these souls and to a greater cause?"

Ignoring Elkon, Daisy calmly got up on one knee and spat out some blood to the side. She saw that The Crestfallen was having a very

difficult time trying to bring itself back to its feet, courtesy of her back-crushing maneuver. *The thing's got plenty of fight in it,* she thought. *Now's my chance; I'm gonna have to go for the proverbial jugular* , o *therwise it's going to just keep reforming, and I'll eventually run out of energy.*

"Time for ol' reliable!" Daisy shouted, raising her left hand to eye level and forming her Crystal Fist. With blazing speed, she sprinted towards The Crestfallen, got up underneath the titan as it balanced itself on its hands and knees, and delivered a powerful, crystal-enhanced uppercut to its abdomen. The force lifted the titan off the ground and flipped it onto its back. Daisy made several jumps backwards until she was about thirty yards away. Elkon showed no emotion at the sight of his creation being brought to defeat. The Crestfallen was now damaged to the point that souls were essentially leaking out of its form.

"It didn't counter the attack..." Elkon whispered to himself. "And now it's losing souls by the second... It's going to be destroyed..."

"And now to finish this!" Daisy yelled as she retracted both her arms as far as possible. Large amounts of seismic energy began to crackle and rumble around her hands. The Crestfallen writhed in an erratic fit that was equally as depressive as it was traumatizing. For a brief moment, Daisy did not want to destroy the entity. She paused herself, maintaining her charge but not building on it. Questions of what would happen to all those souls flooded her mind. *What would happen to all those souls that had already been released?* she thought. *If I bring my hands forward and unleash my Seismic Wave, do I prove everything that Elkon had said earlier? Would letting loose this attack make me a hero...or a villain? Who really is the bad guy in all of this...*

Elkon noticed that Daisy was stalling. *Interesting* , he thought. *If she keeps stalling like this, then The Crestfallen should have enough time to repair and reform itself...but why are you stalling now all of a sudden, earth wielder?*

"Why is she not firing her blast?" Bowser asked in frustration. "There's more than enough charge – just do it already!"

The Crestfallen attempted to repair itself, but the overwhelming damage it had taken proved to be too much stress to overcome. The titan's sullen and dejected expression and posture was conceding the fight, so the outcome of the conflict rested in Daisy's charged and rumbling hands.

Is this right? Daisy wondered. *If I destroy The Crestfallen with this attack, I might also be destroying the countless souls gathered within that have already suffered through enough elemental onslaught . These souls experienced all the suffering and pain they could tolerate in their living bodies, so why am I about to deliver more? The Crestfallen was not bad at all; it was just venting its pains and tribulations at us. Elkon, this is everything that you were trying to tell us earlier, but I was too angry to actually listen to what you had to say... I don't know if I can-*

"GET OUTTA MY TOWN YOU GOTHIC PUNK!"

"What – WHY ARE YOU HERE?!" Bowser screamed with surprise.

"You gotta be kidding me!" Daisy exclaimed.

Waluigi stood at the entrance to the gemstone room, a loaded Bob-omb Launcher in his hands aimed squarely at The Crestfallen's vulnerable opening. Nothing was stopping him from firing his weapon, nor was there any obstruction in his line of sight. All he had to do was pull the trigger.

"Waluigi, wait!" Daisy yelled, dispelling her charged attack.

"Hakuna matata," the Mayor of Maralah echoed, firing off his launcher.

"Get out of the way now!" Daisy angrily screamed at the downed giant. In that moment, time seemed to slow to a fourth of its normal rate. Four bob-ombs flew through the air and made direct contact on The Crestfallen's exposed torso, blitzing and bombarding the titan and causing an earthshaking explosion that dismantled it in its entirety.

Chapter XI

Aftershock :

The Crestfallen's fractured and fragmented body was strewn out on the floor of the massive gemstone room. All the souls that remained within were leaking out and escaping its shattered shell.

"No..." Daisy mumbled to herself, brooding and frustrated in tone. "It didn't have to happen like this..."

"Very interesting, Daisy..." Elkon said to himself under his breath.

"You're next," Waluigi told Elkon, his Bob-omb Launcher already reloaded. "WALUIGI TIME!" Four more bob-ombs shot from the launcher at Elkon, only for the dark fiend to slash the air with his hand to create a dimensional portal that took the projectiles and disappeared.

"Wha-Wha-What?!" Waluigi blurted out in surprise.

"Stay out of this, little man," said Elkon. "I could snap your frail body with little exertion."

"You listen to me buddy!" the Mayor of Maralah yelled. "You've trespassed in my town and you've got the nerve to tell me to stay out of your way? I don't think so! It's my job to deal with trouble makers like you who pose a significant threat to my people! If you think you can stay here any longer than it takes for you to leave, TOO BAD! You're not welcome here, so scram!"

"Waluigi, shut up before he makes you shut up!" snapped Daisy. "Please, just get back now!"

"Bothersome little toothpick..." Elkon said as he raised a hand. He shot off a dart of densely concentrated energy at the Maralah Mayor.

"Woah!" Waluigi screamed.

Without thinking – not like she had time to think anyways – Daisy darted over and leapt in front of Waluigi to take the blast herself instead. The energy hit right in her abdomen, causing Daisy to let out a hoarse scream. She fell and rolled over on the ground, able to clearly hear her own heartbeat. Bowser and Athelstan rushed over to take up position in front of the downed Moirai of Earth.

"Bad move, Daisy," said Elkon. "...But I'm sure the pain from that blast will make sure you realize that."

Daisy grunted as she got to her feet and held the center of her waist to try and subdue the intense burning and aching without success. She coughed up a bit of blood and croaked, then flopped back onto the ground.

Elkon looked at the suffering earth wielder. "Does that hurt, Daisy? Good, it's supposed to." He then addressed the group as a whole. "Your victory here today proves nothing else but your inability to see your faults in standing against me. Perhaps I've underestimated your skills and powers...but no more. I have a whole cast of archfiends you will have to face, lying in wait at each shrine should you dare to continue. I've seen all I've needed to from you all, so don't expect to see me anytime soon."

Rosalina appeared alongside Bowser and Athelstan. To the surprise of the Moirai, this time it was the actual Elder of the Cosmos beside them and not an astral clone.

"I don't know who you are," Rosalina said to Elkon. "It took me a while to go through the records and consult with those at the Comet Observatory, and we had been unable to deduce much of anything; there is barely any information of you on record..."

"Is that so?" Elkon asked with condescending interest. "Good. You would've been unable to do anything with that information whether or not you had it. And just what were you planning on doing with that information if you did have it?"

" *I'm* not going to do a thing," Rosalina replied. "But I will urge you to reconsider your course of action. If you are still intent on carrying out your will as it stands now, then I must leave it to the elemental

wielders who stand before you to prevent your vision from coming to fruition."

"You know my response to that," said Elkon.

"As was expected," said Rosalina. "Though, my statement is unchanged. It is destiny that they will stand against you in battle and prevail."

"That remains to be seen," Elkon responded before addressing the group as a whole once more. "I've spent enough time here. Know that I'm grateful...that you've beaten that giant, but know as well that this doesn't change anything." Elkon then glowed with a pink light, his body warping as he disappeared.

Warra walked over to the group with Marut over his shoulder as Daisy forced herself up to her feet. "Are you alright, Daisy?" he asked.

"Yeah," Daisy said. She stood up straight but with visible tension in her face from trying to ignore the pain. Apart from that, she appeared depressingly upset and weary. Her voice had become very low and heavy.

"You haven't woken up Marut yet?" Bowser asked Warra. "You still have that special water, don't you?"

"I apologize," said Warra. "My healing water is only good for healing external wounds. It has no effect on internal healing unless there's a break in the skin or sufficient trauma, nor can it restore consciousness. I will be able to use it on Daisy though since the blunt trauma-"

"No," Daisy said, cutting him off. "I don't want it."

"Daisy," Bowser began. "That seemed like a very nasty shot you took-"

"I don't care," she interrupted again. "I'm fine."

"You pulled off some nice moves, Daisy!" Athelstan said in praise. "To be an earth wielder and be an almost completely offensive

fighter is definitely an anomaly. Earth wielders are known for their defensive tactics and endurance, but this is about as opposite as it can get."

"In any case, you turned out to be the best option we had since The Crestfallen needed to be defeated with a total beatdown," Warra said. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

"It's alright," said Daisy, only partially paying attention to them.

"And what a way to finish!" Athelstan exclaimed. "Nice going there, Waluigi, with your bob-ombs to secure the win today!"

"We didn't win anything..." Daisy muttered. "Bowser, c'mon." Her remark puzzled everyone, but she added nothing to it and walked towards the Earth Gemstone in silence. Bowser took out the Dimensional Mirror and followed Daisy to the gemstone pedestal. Once there, Bowser held the mirror and aimed the lens at the gemstone, then Daisy brought up a hand and let her elemental earth energy flow through and out her palm into the mirror lens. The energy magnified through the lens and hit the gemstone to purify the corrupted earth element.

Once the task was completed, Daisy cut off the energy flow and knelt down to connect with the earth beneath her so she could survey the seismic activity underground. As she sensed beneath the surface, she remembered Elkon's words and played them back in her mind again. *What about what you're fighting for makes it so righteous and destined to protect the interests of those wishing to take advantage of nature itself to gain world power?* she heard in her thoughts. *You're protecting tyrants and dictators, villains and gangs, all who seek to prey upon the young and helpless through abuse of the very nature that gave them life* .

She stood up from the ground once she was able to confirm that all the violent seismic energy from earlier had been eased. *Millions of lives have been lost throughout time because of power your race has misused* , Elkon's voice echoed in her mind. *The more greed, the more lust, the more hatred within one person...the more destruction, the more death, and the more pain is created; all in an effort to gain as much power and control as he or she can*

handle...and then some. No matter who or how many die...no matter how much is obliterated...the means to the end does not matter, as long as that domination is achieved. The elements were already thoroughly tainted long before I had anything to do with them. So you see, my so-called, 'corruption' of the elements is nothing at all compared to the corruption that your kind has instituted over the years...

"Everything has calmed to a near standstill down there," Daisy reported to the Koopa King.

"Excellent. We'll let the others know that we're finished here," said Bowser, walking back to the group. Daisy followed, her demeanor unchanged.

"What did Elkon mean by that?" asked Athelstan. "He's grateful we destroyed The Crestfallen?"

"What if Elkon actually *wanted* us to destroy The Crestfallen?" said Warra.

"It appears that the souls that were released from the destruction of The Crestfallen were all finally laid to rest," said Rosalina. "I can't explain how this has happened, but I cannot sense their presence anywhere."

"Then he did want us to destroy it," Warra concluded. "However strange that may seem..."

Warra's statement seemed to break Daisy out of her stupor, whose eyes shot open as some vitality returned to her face. "I get it," she said under her breath in amazement. "He brought the souls from the Dimension of the Lost here, allowing them to vent their sufferings and pains so that they could finally achieve their rest, regardless of whatever the outcome here today would've been."

"Did anything happen in town while we were handling business here?" Athelstan asked.

"There was a brief earthquake scare at Maralah that brought down a handful of trees in scattered locations," said Rosalina. "But no

casualties resulted from the incident."

"Had you taken any longer, I would've been forced to order a mandatory evacuation," Waluigi added. "So I coaxed myself into coming here to check out why you were taking so long!"

"So can you tell us what you've figured out about Elkon, great Elder of the Cosmos?" Warra asked in request.

Rosalina bowed her head and closed her eyes. She gave no response at first, raising alarm in the Moirai.

"What is it, grand one?" Warra asked again.

Rosalina's voice lowered. "I've figured out next to nothing. He came from a small town, but after consultation with the others at the Comet Observatory, we've been able to come up with nothing other than the fact that he died almost twenty years ago."

"What?!" Bowser groaned.

Rosalina opened her eyes halfway when she spoke again. "We've tried to do everything we could with what we had on record to figure out at least some sort of information regarding Elkon, but all that ever came back was that he's supposed to be dead."

"And yet he's not..." said Warra.

"Can you please make sense for once, Rosalina?" asked Bowser, moaning.

"That is as much sense as I can make," Rosalina confessed.

"Nothing's adding up here, is it?" Athelstan asked.

"No," Rosalina gloomily replied. A momentary bout of silence followed.

"So now what?" Athelstan asked with a sense of uncertainty.

"You will still need to restore the elements to their natural state, and when the time comes, you will have to face him," said Rosalina.

"From here on out, things will become much more difficult. I've sensed that the remaining beings that Elkon has stationed in the shrines are no laughing matter at all, but your journeys will grant you the ability to see things that you would otherwise have failed to realize, and you're all progressing in strength and skill with each battle you experience. That is why I am certain that you all will be able to figure out what us overseers and archivists have not been able to, and that you will not falter in this great task that has been laid upon you."

"Grand Elder, please don't be so irrational!" Warra urged. "How can we possibly do that?"

"You can do it, because destiny has chosen the right people for the job," said Rosalina.

"We can do this," Daisy said, now fully awakening from her depressive daze. Her steely resolve resurfaced and escaped the entanglement of her thoughts, her attitude of confidence revived. "We've come this far; we can't stop! And even if any of you decide that you can't go on, I won't allow you to quit! We have to keep pressing forward; adversity like this is meant to be overcome, not conceded to."

Everyone in the group looked at Daisy, not surprised by her demeanor but rather surprised that she had snapped right back into it after having fallen far out of it. Daisy's eyes were shining something fierce, and her tone matched her words. "We have to to purify the elements, and we have to get to Elkon and confront him – there's too much at stake!"

Everyone was speechless for a while. Then Waluigi spoke up in realization. "That's how you beat me..." Everyone turned to the Mayor of Maralah for him to explain what he meant. "For the longest time after I lost to you in the Striker Finals last year, I kept trying to figure out how you were able to beat me within seconds of going to overtime despite being down one-nil going into the final two minutes, but I never figured it out until now. It's because you never took 'no' for an answer. You were on a mission to prove something, and although I don't know what it was you were trying to prove, I know that you were intent on proving it and you knew that you had to

succeed. That's all you knew; you didn't care about what would happen if you lost or care about your own well-being or care about how difficult or unlikely it would be to win. It was something you had to do so you did it, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. That was clutch."

Now Daisy stood without words. She had never heard Waluigi talk like that in her life – nor did she ever think it was even possible. She had heard too many snide remarks from him in the past.

"So if I were you guys, I'd take her words and her mindset to heart," Waluigi firmly said.

"I always have," said Athelstan. "She hasn't shown me any reason not to!"

"I'm just now starting to learn," said Warra. "I'm sure Marut here would agree completely if he was awake."

"We vowed to win," Bowser said in reference to their pledge. "So that's what we're going to do."

Rosalina gave a heartwarming smile. "I'm proud of you all, and I can't wait to see the great things that you'll accomplish."

"They will be great," Daisy assured the Elder of the Cosmos. "And they will be accomplished. This mission is far too important to fail!" Her complexion and posture was the epitome of confidence.

"I will continue to be on standby to guide you if necessary, and I will keep you all in my prayers," Rosalina said. She then teleported back to the Comet Observatory.

"That look of yours will become famous some day, Daisy," said Warra. "We need that look from you, because so far, you've been the only one who has been able to sustain it."

"You know, that Rosalina is pretty good-looking isn't she?" Waluigi wondered aloud.

"Yeah, okay, Waluigi," said Bowser. "She may look like she's thirty but I guarantee you that she's been around to see the ancestors of your grandparent's grandparents."

"Which is why I'm shocked that she and the other overseers didn't have any record of Elkon past his supposed 'death,' " Warra said. "But in any case, we gotta head to the next shrine."

"Are you coming along with us?" Athelstan asked Waluigi.

"While I'd love to come along, I have Maralah to look after," Waluigi replied. "Besides, you have your path to follow, and wherever that takes you, you were meant to be there so that you all can accomplish great things! Now, I had a group of my attendants drive your truck around to an area about four miles north of here. They'll be waiting for you and'll be ready to hand off your vehicle once you arrive."

"Then let's waste no time and get moving to the next shrine!" Bowser insisted. "I guess we'll be seeing you later, Waluigi."

"Thanks for the help and the hospitality, mayor!" said Athelstan.

"It was a pleasure," Warra said, shaking hands with Waluigi.

The five Moirai, with Marut still out cold on Warra's shoulders, turned and started in the direction from which they came to exit the shrine. Daisy didn't say anything, but looked back, cocked a smile, and held a thumbs up at the Mayor of Maralah.

"Thanks again for visiting!" Waluigi shouted. "Good luck with the next five shrines! Please tell your friends and businesses about Maralah's thriving lifestyle and economy!"

As the Moirai bolted through the corridors and caverns of the beauteous Earth Shrine back to the surface, Daisy had only one thing on her mind. *I vow to win* , she thought. *And when we win, we'll win the right way, whatever way that may be.*

Chapter XII

The Easternmost North :

The evening hours were upon the Moirai as they sped their way north in the direction of the Water Shrine. Bowser was at the wheel of the large and imposing Offroader, and Marut was still unconscious from earlier. Daisy did not pay attention to where they were going, instead staring at her knocked out air teammate with worry.

"I hope he wakes up soon..." said the Moirai of Earth.

"Yeah...definitely a valiant and worthy combatant," said Warra. "No matter how goofy he may be at times."

"Quite an effort even though it was a short bout," Athelstan commented.

"You know, the rest of us have some form of weaponry, but you don't have any," Warra said to Daisy. "Don't you think it would help in battles? I mean, even Bowser has his claws. What's the reasoning behind that, Daisy?"

"I don't want any, to be honest," Daisy answered. "I'm most comfortable with hand-to-hand. Besides that, I really don't have any weapon or tool skills anyways."

"What about for elemental control and energy conservation?" Warra asked. "It helps to have that 'extension' of yourself that you can use for more focus and less strain."

"I have my wrist and ankle weights like I've always had," Daisy replied. "I think having a weapon would be more of a crutch for me than an aid."

"Hey, if it works for you, then it shouldn't matter what you do," said Athelstan. "Too many people these days are trying to copy other people anyways. I say the best things and the best people are the

unconventional and the unique."

Just as they got onto a large bridge that stretched for a few miles over a body of water, an outline of a city became visible. The city glowed in the orange sunset sky, a sense of vibrancy and merriness about the metropolis prominent even from afar. Skyscrapers abounded, each lit up in a way that resembled holiday decorations. It looked like a wondrous place, but a sudden realization alarmed Warra.

"This city..." Warra said. "It's the same city I saw in my dreams being overtaken by the ocean!"

"Really?" Bowser asked with interest. He then remembered when the water wielder had talked about dreams of a flooded city back at the Fire Shrine.

"Yes! And the Water Shrine is definitely somewhere very close to this city!" Warra asserted.

"That agrees with the records I obtained from my hometown," Athelstan confirmed. "The only thing is, the location of the shrine is supposed to be somewhere just off the coast of this city, Delight City."

"Delight City, huh?" said Bowser. "So does that mean we're all gonna break out in song and dance once we get downtown? If that's the case, you'll have to continue on without me and come back to get me for the next region."

The sun had gone down and the dark night sky took over once they got within the city. The streets bustled with vehicles and pedestrians. The metropolis teemed with celebrations, concerts, and festivals of all sorts with all different kinds of people. Bright lights were all over the lively environment, and the audio of urban activity was ever present in its full and unadulterated glory.

Bowser's Offroader continued to move down the road underneath the almost overwhelming city lights. Several blocks and minutes

down the road however, the tone shifted in its entirety, as a the Moirai drove up to a collection of police cars and vans gathered around a Fourth National Commons Bank in what appeared to be a crime scene. The large group of officers obstructed the road and had prevented any further travel. A helicopter was hovering overhead with a searchlight shining down on the bank.

"Looks like something big has happened here," said Daisy. "Let's check it out."

The Offroader came to a halt and Bowser, Athelstan, and Daisy got out. Warra stayed in the truck with the unconscious Marut. The three that got out walked up to who appeared to be the two leaders of the group, a koopa and a man both in light blue and red uniforms.

"What are you doing here?" the koopa asked. "This is a closed off area!"

"What's going on here?" Athelstan asked.

"The Mafio Brothers are at it again!" said the man. "They've staged a full scale heist of the bank with all their henchmen!"

"Mafio Brothers?" Daisy asked. "I'm sorry, we're not from around here. We don't know who you're talking about."

"I see. Our apologies," said the man.

"I'm Commissioner Euley," The koopa announced to the Moirai. He gestured to his human counterpart. "And this is Officer Cappa. The Mafio Brothers are two underground mob leaders that have been smuggling money away from the city for almost a year now! They've been an extremely difficult bust and have been able to evade us every time we've confronted them!"

"They're in the bank now and have been reported to have secured over sixty-eight million gold coins!" Officer Cappa added. "We've got the bank surrounded on all sides, but anytime we try to advance into the bank, their henchmen push us back with their wild flamethrowers and Stone Shotguns!"

"We've now been here for three hours!" one of the other cops said.

"Damn it, those guys are gonna be the downfall of this city if we can't bring 'em in!" Officer Cappa yelled.

"Well, let's see what we can do in there," Bowser said, walking towards the cobblestone stairs to the bank. Daisy and Athelstan both followed.

"Hold on there civilians! It's dangerous in there!" Commissioner Euley Warned.

"What? Civilian?!" Daisy snapped. "Please!"

The three Moirai moved up to the base of the flight of steps, only for two mobsters to swing open the doors to the bank from the inside and blow fire at them with their flamethrowers. Daisy and Athelstan leapt backwards out of range, but Bowser shrugged off the attack and continued the through the flames. Smoke obscured the entrance to the bank both from the inside and the outside. The two flamethrower henchmen, not being able to see past the smoke, didn't see Bowser emerge. He grabbed the two of them, knocked the two of them out by slamming them together, and tossed them down the steps for the cops to handle. Daisy and Athelstan then rushed up the steps and joined Bowser inside the bank.

"We'll use my fire to create a concealing smokescreen so that you can take them out quickly without risk of getting shot at," Bowser said under his breath.

Daisy and Athelstan both nodded in response. When the smoke began clearing, they noticed that there were twenty more henchmen waiting for them inside, all armed with either a flamethrower or Stone Shotgun. Bowser conjured two large fireballs and threw them into the ground to kick up more obscuring smoke. From the smoke, Daisy rushed out with impressive quickness along the right side of the bank room and delivered knockout hits to two of the henchmen before anyone spotted her. Bowser threw another fireball in front of Daisy to give her more cover for her to take out three more of the henchmen on her way to the other side of the room.

With Daisy grabbing most of the attention, Athelstan was able to knockout three henchmen on the left side of the room and Bowser

took out a group of four that were grouped in the center using his Whirling Fortress attack. The eight henchmen remaining all opened fire once the fighters became visible, forcing Daisy, Athelstan, and Bowser to all take cover. Bowser conjured two more large fireballs and threw them out to the side, creating more smoke and giving Athelstan more cover so that he could advance and take out another henchman. Athelstan drew the attention towards him, at which point Daisy dashed towards another henchman and delivered a knockout uppercut.

Another two fireballs were thrown towards the back of the room where Daisy was, obscuring the vision of everyone remaining. Bowser and Athelstan joined Daisy in the back of the room as Delight City's police forces moved into the banks to capture and secure all the henchmen and subdue the remaining ones that had not been knocked out. A henchman noticed movement and fired off a few shots, one of them just clipping Athelstan in the arm. A cop caught that henchman and restrained him just moments after he had shot.

With the police handling business in the main room, the three Moirai went searching through the hallways of the bank behind the counter. One turn led them to the vault room, where two oddly familiar looking, black-suited men in hats stood waiting with dozens of full sacks for their chance to escape.

"When in the hell are the rest of our boys supposed to get here?" the taller one asked.

"They'll be here any minute now man, chill out!" the shorter one replied.

"Sorry, bro," the tall one apologized. "I'm just getting impatient thinking about that Mercedes-Benz Karting model I'll be able to get with all this extra dough, and how I'll use it to blow away the competition in Walt's race next month."

"We have more than enough money for that from those 'shroom exports we had last month," said the shorter one. "But this score right here is gonna take us places!"

Bowser made a throat clearing noise to alert the two mafiosos, who jumped in surprise at the fact that the fighters were able to get past their henchmen. Daisy and Athelstan looked ready to pounce.

"Who the hell are you people?" The tall one asked. "You better get back if you value your lives..."

"So you're the Mafio brothers; Mario and Luigi!" Bowser called out, matching the two mens' likeness to the two Mushroom Kingdom plumbers. "You've got some nerve-"

"They can't be," said Daisy. "The shorter and thicker one's got some sort of cocky smile to him, and the tall, thin one's not showing any signs of cowardice."

"Mario and Luigi?" the shorter one asked. "Ya blown a gasket there boy."

"We're Max and Lewis!" the taller one corrected.

"They don't sound anything like them at all either!" said Daisy.

"Then they're doppelgangers of Mario and Luigi!" Bowser deduced.

Daisy frowned and shook her head. "Max, Lewis...Walt... What...?"

"I don't know what this giant turtle-dinosaur's talkin' about, but ya'll need to scram!" Max shouted.

"We're trying to conduct some business here and we don't need any interns slowing us down, trying to figure out how the game works," said Lewis. "Especially not some amazon woman, a steroid user with gigantism, and their pet turtle-dinosaur!"

"Did he just call me an amazon?" Daisy asked. "I'm 5'9! You're both probably only just over four feet tall on a good day!"

"And I've definitely not used any performance-enhancing drugs!" Athelstan yelled.

"I'M NOBODY'S PET!" Bowser shouted.

"It's a shame when people are in denial ain't it bro?" said Lewis.

"Oh that's it! You wanna go?!" Daisy yelled.

Max haughtily laughed. "Sorry Xena, but any minute now the rest of our crew will show up with an arsenal of Rocket-Propelled Bob-ombs and enough sticky explosives to allow us an easy escape with all this loot *and* take out a large portion of these cops all at the same time!"

"Oh c'mon!" Daisy grunted.

"You can't be serious!" Bowser yelled.

"Not good," said Athelstan.

"I'll go out and warn the police!" Daisy said, dashing in the direction they had just come from.

"You'd better follow your friend there if you don't want to be surrounded by lethal weapons," Lewis said.

"Damn, we don't have a choice!" Bowser said to Athelstan. "C'mon! And let's get out of here!" Athelstan followed Bowser out and down the hallway, en route back to the front of the bank.

"C'mon, Lewis, let's blow this starsicle stand!" Max ordered.

"Hah! Right behind ya, Max!" Lewis replied, pulling out a grenade.

Daisy had just sprinted back outside and was descending the stairs to get to where Commissioner Euley and Officer Cappa were stationed. Warra was out of the Offroader, talking with the two policemen when Daisy ran up to meet them.

"Good job in there handling those mobsters!" Commissioner Euley said in praise.

"No time!" Daisy yelled. "A whole big group of mobsters are on their way and'll be here any minute now! If you don't clear out right now,

they're going to blow you all clear out of here!"

"What?!" Officer Cappa exclaimed. "You're kidding!"

"This'll need the Delight City National Guard then!" said Commissioner Euley.

"Right! I'll buzz them in," Officer Kappa replied while reaching for his handheld receiver.

As Bowser and Athelstan ran down the flight of stairs to rejoin Daisy, Commissioner Euley held up a megaphone and called into the bank, "ATTENTION; ALL PERSONNEL WITHDRAW FROM THE BANK INTERIOR."

"Did anything happen out here yet?" Bowser asked. As soon as he said that, everyone heard two explosions coming from the rear end of the bank.

"Yes!" Athelstan said to the Koopa King. Another explosion then went off, much more audible than the former two.

"Stand down, hold your ground and do not react!" Commissioner Euley quickly ordered over the megaphone.

"We need the National Guard over here, stat," Officer Cappa said through his handheld receiver.

There was a lull in the action for a few brief moments, but then Six Jeeps and two Audi's rounded the right side corner of the bank and fired off two bob-omb rockets at the police brigade. They hit and cleared three vacant police vehicles off the road, allowing passage for driving. As they sped through, Max and Lewis could be seen in one of the Audi's. Daisy caught sight of a Jeep filled with all the bags of coins that the Mafio Brothers had secured. The helicopter that was surveying the scene from overhead took off in pursuit of the runaways.

"No! They're going to get away again!" Commissioner Euley screamed.

"No, they won't!" Athelstan declared. "Bowser, C'mon and let's go

after them in your truck!"

"But what about the Water Shrine?!" Bowser asked.

"Warra and I will go and handle it!" Daisy replied. "You guys just go get Max and Lewis! They can't be allowed to keep screwing the law over! Just go now – no time!"

"Take this," Bowser said, pulling out the Dimensional Mirror. He tossed it at Daisy, and got in the Offroader with Athelstan. In mere seconds, the Offroader sped off to follow the helicopter.

"Suspects are heading westbound; six Jeeps, two Audi's, all black," Officer Cappa spoke into his handheld receiver.

"The National Guard will take over the pursuit from here; standby for backup and possible arrest," Commissioner Euley told the available police squadrons over the megaphone.

"Now correct me if I'm wrong, but did you say that you were heading to the Water Shrine?" Officer Cappa asked Daisy and Warra.

"Yes, do you know where it is?" asked Warra.

"Now normally, it's against Delight City law for civilians to enter the Water Shrine," Officer Cappa replied. "So you better have good reason for going there."

"You're still calling us civilians?" Daisy asked. "Did you not just see what we did in there?"

"Fine; vigilantes," Officer Cappa said.

"That's not much better," gripped Daisy.

"We have to go to the Water Shrine and purify the corruption of the water element," said Warra. "You've been having disturbances in the nature here, haven't you?"

"Ah, yes," said Commissioner Euley. "Pristine Bay actually had a pier built atop a patch of land out in the water, and this pier extended back to the mainland. That piece of land was only slightly below the

level of the mainland, but was also a good ten feet above sea level. However, the sea level has risen substantially – to the point that that patch of land is now completely submerged and we're now getting daily complaints of water rising up and flowing onto the streets that run along the bay. There were a few incidents where the water was so aggressive that parked vehicles on the bay side of the streets were dragged into the water! We've also had reports of ridiculous increases in surf height activity."

"Yeah, that sounds like what I was expecting," said Warra. "We can stop the water problems and revert the sea level back to normal if we can get to the Water Shrine, but we have to get there now! Otherwise, the water will continue to rise and take over the inland and there may be the potential for a tsunami to develop!"

"Well, that's not good at all!" Commissioner Euley replied as-a-matter-of-factly. "I suppose then, that we can probably grant you entrance to the Water Shrine just this once."

Daisy grunted in disgust. *Frickin' police* , she thought, her arms crossed.

"The Water Shrine is underneath an island about a half mile off the coast of Pristine Bay," said Officer Cappa. "Officer April can take you to the pier and get you to the island by boat." He motioned to one of the nearby officers for her to come over. "Just be careful; we've had a lot of disappearances around here within the past several days."

"What do you mean by that?" Warra asked.

"Lots and lots of drownings," Officer Cappa said. "Strange thing is, the people that were drowned were not even in the water before drowning. The anecdotal evidence we've compiled says that people that were near the bay were taken and dragged into the water, never to be seen or heard from again. These local drownings are said to be the work of the Vodyanoy, a demonic creature. We don't have any more information on the matter or that creature. So just be wary of your surroundings."

"I'm certain Warra and I will be fine, but thanks for the warning

anyways," Daisy replied.

"Alright, but whatever you do, don't let it pull you underneath the water!" Officer Cappa warned. "You won't come back up..."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Daisy said, looking for somewhere to put away the mirror. It was only at that point that she realized she had forgotten something. "Damn, I left my backpack all the way back at Bowser's Palace, and I didn't even notice until now."

"Oh yeah, right, you did have one of those didn't you?" said Warra. "I don't remember you having one on when we left for the Stone Shrine though."

"That's right!" Daisy exclaimed in remembrance. "I must have left it in the room I stayed in! There was so much going on that it didn't even cross my mind!"

"No big deal, I can rope the mirror around my hip sheath," said Warra, grabbing the Dimensional Mirror from her.

"If you're ready to go, let's get into my car," said Officer April. "I'll take you to Pristine Bay so we can get on a boat and head to the Water Shrine."

"Yeah, let's go, quickly," said Daisy. Officer April led Daisy and Warra to her car. Once they got in, they started down the street, heading east with urgency.

Chapter XIII

The Mafio Brothers on the Run :

The Offroader bolted down the streets, tracking the helicopter and its spotlight as a guide. Traffic on the roadways had been cleared due in part to influence from the speeding band of mafiosos as well as the police siren that was going off from the pursuing helicopter overhead. Marut was still in the back seat, unconscious and getting jostled around a bit from the speed and turns of the truck. Slowly but surely he started coming back to his senses. He realized that he was in the back of the Offroader when he saw Bowser and Athelstan in the front seats. The air wielder then sat up, still a bit dazed.

"Why are we going so fast..." Marut mumbled. After a few seconds, he returned to full consciousness in surprise. "Why are we following that helicopter? How'd we get in a city?"

"We're in a police chase!" said Athelstan.

"What do ya mean a police chase?!" Marut shouted. "What did you guys do?!"

"No! Not us!" yelled Bowser. He had been twisting the wheel, zipping around corners trying to catch up to where the helicopter was shining down its spotlight.

"Mafia!" Athelstan answered. "Stole about sixty-eight million in gold coins and took off with it!"

"That's a lot!" Marut exclaimed.

"Ya think?" Bowser rhetorically asked. "It's not a piggy bank they stole from a kindergartner!"

"Yeah! Otherwise they would've stole sixty-eight million piggy banks!" Athelstan replied. "Actually, that sounds like the smarter thing to do since they'd get a helluva lot more money that way!"

"And you said Mafia?!" Marut shouted, his hands on his head. "They exist?! I thought they were a myth!"

"WHAT?!" Bowser yelled in disbelief while making another hard turn.

After zipping through a few more blocks, they caught sight of the fleeing mafia vehicles. Bowser stomped on the gas pedal as he copied some of the tight drifts that the vehicles ahead had started making. The winding and twisting banks and hills that the city was built on top of only made the chase that much more difficult.

"Holy crap – they are real!" Marut hollered. The runaway cars took up nearly three-quarters of the road. If it wasn't for the police siren overhead, there would've already been a minimum of a dozen crashes.

"Keep on the gas!" Athelstan yelled. They inched closer and closer to the vehicles. However, they got close enough for some of the mobsters to notice them.

"This is a fast truck now that I think about it," said Marut.

"Koopa tech, bro," said Bowser.

A mobster poked his head out of the window of one of the Audis, then pulled out an RPB and fired it at the Offroader. It just missed to the side but caused Bowser to slow his truck up to make sure it didn't crash from evading the projectile. The mafia began to ease further away from the Moirai.

"They're starting to pull out of sight again! We need to speed up!" Athelstan exclaimed.

"Cause WE GOTTA GO FAST!" Marut shouted.

"What're you doing..." Bowser asked in anticipation.

"GOTTA GO FAST!"

"No..."

"GOTTA GO FASTER, FASTER, FASTA-FASTA-FASTER - GO,

GO-GO, GO-GO, GO GO-"

"UGH!" Bowser screamed in annoyance. "NEVER AGAIN! Never! Again!"

"Well just go faster then!" Marut urged.

Bowser put the speed on again and closed the distance between them and the mobsters. Another henchman turned around in one of the Jeeps and shot off a round from his RPB, but a hard right turn made him misfire into the sky. Bowser's truck sharply followed and crept ever closer. Yet another RPB fired at the Moirai, but it just missed overhead and blew up in the air.

"Marut! Blast them!" Athelstan shouted. "We're not gonna keep getting these lucky breaks!"

"Right," the Moirai of air replied. He unsheathed his ninjato and angled himself outside the passenger-side window in the middle of the truck. He made a quick pulse of energy through his blade and discharged a wicked gust at the mafia vehicles, causing them to momentarily lose their control. This allowed Bowser to force his truck even further towards the mafiosos, closing the gap between them to within a second.

"I got one more shot left," said Marut. "Keep in mind, I just became conscious."

"Fire it off now!" Bowser barked. "At the lead Jeep in front!"

At this point, all of the vehicles were running at their top speeds. Adrenaline surged in all parties, no mind being paid to whatever any traffic lights were displaying. They all drifted a corner and propelled into what looked to be a long straightaway ride for the remainder of the chase, but Marut would not let the chase continue any longer than necessary. He made a swipe with his ninjato that created an erratic and nonlinear gust of slicing air that bypassed overhead all the mafia vehicles to hit the lead Jeep in front.

Bowser hit the breaks on his truck and slowed down to a stop. The mafia's lead Jeep took the hit and lost control of its stability, causing

it to drastically slow down. Consequently, every mafia vehicle ran into each other trying to slow down and evade the spastic lead Jeep, resulting in a massive pileup of all the mafia vehicles.

Bowser, Athelstan, and Marut got out of Bowser's truck and rushed towards the major crash. The helicopter that had been overhead locked its spotlight on the vehicular mess and began to encircle the developing scene. By this time, a second helicopter had also come into view but moved towards the center and hovered in the air. Most of the mafiosos were trying to free themselves from the wreckage, but Max and Lewis had already freed themselves from their Audi.

"Why do those two look so short?" asked Marut. "They're like barely four feet tall, and that thin one's not too much taller than the thicker one..."

"Ya lousy BUM!" Max yelled at the driver of the lead Jeep. "Don't you know how ta drive ya goomba?!"

"You're lucky you're not a goomba!" Lewis snapped at the driver. "I woulda stomped ya in so hard that you'd be driving with ya feet and sittin' on ya head!"

The Delight City National Guard came rushing up from behind the Moirai in Humvees and Bullet Blasters. A voice could be heard from a megaphone, projecting, "Do not brandish any weapons, do not move; we of the National Guard will apprehend you should you make any more immediate actions, regardless of intention. Remain silent as per your rights."

"Yo! Get the hell outta the way!" Lewis yelled at Max. "C'mon, we gotta move it!" Lewis pulled out a flamethrower from the backseat of the totaled Audi and sprayed flames in front of the elemental wielders as an obstruction so they could make an escape through the alleyways off on the left side of the road.

Athelstan swung his halberd through the flames to bat them out and clear the way so Marut could pursue the Mafio Brothers. Max and Lewis had got a good ways into the alleys before Marut caught up and tackled Lewis to the ground. Max turned around after hearing a grunt and a thud to see Lewis trying unsuccessfully to free himself

from underneath Marut.

"Get offa him ya overgrown brute!" Max yelled.

"Overgrown? I'm 5'8"!" Marut exclaimed. "You're undergrown! It's not my fault you're four feet short!"

"Get this freak of nature off of me, Max!" Lewis screamed in frustration. Max bull rushed Marut and punched him in the jaw, freeing his brother. Max then threw another punch that Marut batted away. Lewis came up to try and punch Marut in his midsection, but the Moirai of Air grabbed Max and pulled him in front of the punch for the mafioso to take the hit to his face instead.

"Lewis, ya dumbass!" Max barked.

"How was I supposed to know he was gonna do that?!" Lewis shouted. Max tried to break free from Marut's hold but could not escape, instead pinned down by the green-clothed fighter.

"Get offa me ya gigantic freak show!" Max wailed.

"You wanna see a *real* big guy?" Athelstan asked as he joined the scene.

"What? Did they make steroids legal or something?" Lewis asked.

"I'm not on steroids!" Athelstan hollered.

"Sure you aren't, ya jolly brown giant," Lewis sneered.

"How are we giant when we're average compared to everyone else?" Marut asked.

"We're about the same size as your henchmen!" Athelstan added. "Explain that!"

"Get him off me Lewis!" Max ordered. Lewis went to attack Marut and get the Moirai of Air off of his brother, but Athelstan snatched him and slammed him to the ground. Bowser came into the alleyway along with troops from the National Guard, ready to handcuff the Mafio Brothers.

"That's them!" Bowser yelled. "In the suits and hats!" Marut and Athelstan handed over the mobsters so the National Guard could restrain them.

"Aw c'mon man! I got a wife and son waiting for me at home!" Max pleaded. "Pearl and Max Jr.!"

"...Pearl?!" Bowser asked. "Pearl...really..."

Lewis let out a yelp when he got handcuffed. "Watch it buddy, that's too tight!"

"Excellent work here, you three!" Commissioner Euley praised, he and Officer Cappa having walked in on the scene. "It has taken us so long to get these guys and their criminal henchmen cuffed up!"

"We prefer to call ourselves 'visionaries' and 'activists,' " said Max. "Businessmen."

"Sharpshooters," Lewis added.

"Alpha Males," Max continued.

"Motormouths," said Bowser.

"We got here as soon as we could once the National Guard notified us of the direction that you all had chased these mobsters in," Officer Cappa said. "The rest of our police force is on their way to take custody of these crooks, but until they get here, the National Guard is handling the arrests of these here Mafio Brothers."

"Finally... It's finally over!" said Commissioner Euley. "We've finally taken care of the biggest case in Delight City history!"

"High five, bro!" Marut shouted, slapping hands with the Commissioner.

Two Ziploc baggies fell out of Lewis' pocket. Officer Cappa picked up the baggies and examined them closely, disgusted by what he found within.

"Shrooms?!" Officer Cappa rasped. "And...what the...STARDUST?!"

"Well, that's not supposed to be there," Lewis replied. "Those were actually my dry cleaner's. I was just on my way to return those to him, but I was in a rush because his place closes at midnight."

"Really?" Commissioner Euley said, rummaging through Max's pockets and pulling out two more baggies. "So did Max's dry cleaner leave these in his pockets as well?

"Yeah!" Max exclaimed. "And I was just on *my* way to return them!"

"Perform a search through the vehicles, do you copy?" Officer Cappa said through his handheld receiver.

"If you find anything in there, it's not mine!" Lewis yelled. "It was in there when I rented the car! I just ran by the bank real quick to make a withdrawal for my payment!"

"Hey – shut up man!" Max yelled at Lewis. "Why are you so stupid?"

"Take these two away already!" Officer Cappa called out to the National Guard. The troops took the Mafio Brothers back out from the alley and grouped them together with their henchmen to wait for the arrival of the rest of the Delight City Police Department.

"We'd like to thank you greatly for your contributions to bringing in two of Delight City's most heinous crooks!" Commissioner Euley said to the Moirai. "Many times we've come so close to nabbing these guys, but a single variable that wasn't accounted for or a bad decision would always ensure their escape! But now we have them! And to get such a large portion of their gang is an added bonus!"

"You've helped us keep the integrity of our city," said Officer Cappa. "If there's anything you need, let us know so that we can provide the assistance!"

"Well, we're sorta on a real important business trip here," Bowser began. "We just need some food and water really, and a place to stay for the night to get some rest so we can head out tomorrow morning fully refreshed."

"We can arrange that!" Commissioner Euley assured. "You can stay in our Delight City Embassy Suites for the night and we'll bring in

some supplies for you!"

"How about we join the noble police force once we've completed our mission?" asked Athelstan.

"No," the Commissioner flatly said. "Just...no."

"Oh well, it was just a suggestion!" Athelstan replied.

"When you're ready, you can return to your truck and follow Officer Cappa," said Commissioner Euley. "He'll direct you to the Delight City Embassy Suites where you'll be able to rest and rejuvenate for the night."

"Awesome!" Marut shouted. "It's gotta be getting close to midnight now; let's go to a nightclub!"

"No," Bowser said. "We're only even resting here because we need to and it's getting late."

"Then can we stay in the city for an extra day and watch the baseball game tomorrow between the Wilds and the Bows?" Marut asked.

"No!" Bowser and Athelstan collectively shouted in response.

"Although, the Wilds and Bows are battling for a wild card spot in the playoffs right about now..." Athelstan subtly added afterwards.

"We can't," said Bowser. "We've got a lot we still need to take care of, so we don't want to delay anymore than we need to. We had discussed this already on the way here."

"Too bad Mayor Waluigi didn't come along to see us capture these mafia guys," said Marut.

"Why? So he could do crotch chops at 'em all?" Bowser asked.

"Now that would be something funny to watch," Athelstan said.

"Hey, where are Daisy and Warra?" asked Marut.

"They went on ahead to handle the Water Shrine while we took off to deal with these mafia creeps," Bowser responded.

"Your friends went out to Pristine Bay," said Commissioner Euley. "That's where the Water Shrine is. I can tell Officer April what happened and she can relay the information to them. They'll rejoin you when they're finished. They actually should have just entered the shrine right about now."

"Just the two of them?" Marut asked. "Don't you think we should go and help them out in case they might need it?"

"No, by this time, they're too far ahead," said Athelstan. "If we were to go and try to join them now, then by the time we actually get there, they may already have cleansed the shrine. Let's just stay back and make sure we're well-rested for tomorrow."

"I agree," said Bowser. "If they come back banged up, we'll be fresh and we'll be able to take over the workload. That's about all we can do at this point. I'm pretty sure that the Water Shrine is in very capable hands."

"You know, while you were knocked out, Daisy beat The Crestfallen all on her own!" Athelstan told Marut. "Well, mostly anyways. Waluigi was the one that finished that giant off!"

"You did good back there, and here, Marut," Bowser said, patting the air wielder on the back.

"Thanks, man," said Marut. "So Daisy and Warra are handling the Water Shrine all by themselves? I wonder how well they're doing in there..."

Chapter XIV

Duel in the Pit :

Officer April had driven Daisy and Warra to Pristine Bay and rented out a personal motorboat to take them to the small, independent island out in the water. The shining moon cast a reflection on the water as their boat pulled up to the island that had to have been less than a half mile in diameter, within which they would find the Water Shrine. Two tall and thick stone towers stood on both sides of the island in front of them that were connected by a long bridge near the top and encircled from the bridge to the bases by spiraling stairs. A small and quaint grove was in the center of the island, but the island itself was for the most part a grassy piece of flatland that lacked any other features. There was however a small structure that resembled a cave-like shed without a door a little ways up the coast that Officer April had just anchored the boat to.

"I'll wait here to take you back after you've finished your business in the shrine," Officer April told Daisy and Warra as the two got out. "The ladder within that shed will take you down into the Water Shrine."

"Thank you for the transport," said Warra.

Daisy and Warra walked up to the structure and went inside to discover that the ladder within extended down into a shaft twenty yards deep. The vertical entrance to the Water Shrine was wide enough for four people to go down all at once.

"No two shrines are built the same way, are they?" Daisy asked.

"No," Warra said. "And that was by design."

"So in theory, if it turns out that we have to go in water while we're down there, would you be able to breathe in it?" Daisy asked.

Warra shrugged, uncertain of how to answer. "My respiratory system can separate the hydrogen and oxygen from water so that

I'm able to 'breathe' air and stay underwater longer than the average person can. It's a skill only a handful of water wielders have been able to master. Unfortunately, the extra hydrogen in my body can cause an early onset of muscular fatigue if I'm down there for too long, so I am still susceptible to drowning like the rest of you."

"Well here's hoping that we don't have to actually go under any water," said Daisy. "I suck at swimming."

"Really?"

"The worst."

They leapt down into the dark shaft and made their landing in what was the true entrance to the Water Shrine. There was a dull ambient teal glow along the walls that partially illuminated a tunnel directly ahead that led into a door. They walked to the end of the tunnel and opened the door to enter a large complex. Surprisingly, the whole Water Shrine was so well backlit with lightstones that it almost seemed like the sun was up and inside the complex itself. The interior of the shrine was vibrant and colorful with a predominately red and blue color scheme. The walls and ceilings were predominately red, and the floors and areas that were underwater were mostly blue. Hints and chunks of yellow were scattered throughout the building. Several pools of water occupied the main room they were currently in, altogether taking up half the space in the room and looking to be of great depth. The walkways were narrow, and some areas of the shrine required traveling on bridges across the pools to reach.

Daisy and Warra went through the center of the main room and then off to their left, following the water element markings along the walls near the ceiling. The two elemental wielders had to pass through several rooms that all shared characteristics with the main room. In one area, a door was bolted shut and the switch for the door was at the bottom of one of the many pools in the building. Warra had to dive down underneath and turn a switch to release the door's bolted locks and allow passage through.

Passing through a few more rooms, they came to what appeared to be the door to the gemstone room. It was a grand door with several

gears connected along the frame and two vents over top of it split to the left and right. The narrow passageway that led to the door barely had walking room for two people, most likely because it was offset by deep pools of water on each side that extended almost the whole length of the room. Warra guided a portion of the pool of water on his left into the two vents, but nothing happened. Confused, he then pulled water from the right pool and shuttled it into the vents. Again, nothing happened.

"I don't get it, this door should've at least budged a bit," said Warra. "I mean, this is the Water Shrine, so I'm assuming that water *is* supposed to go into those vents."

"Oh, try putting water from the left pool into the left vent and water from the right pool into the right vent!" Daisy suggested.

Warra did as Daisy directed. Still, nothing happened.

"Well that's odd," said Daisy. "Maybe this place is broken."

"No..." Warra murmured. "It's not broken at all..." He pulled some water once more from the pools, only this time, he sent water from the pool on his left into the vent to the right and water from the right pool into the vent on the left. As the streams of water traveled into the vents opposite the pools, they met halfway and ran through each other, seemingly sharing individual properties that each had that Warra and Daisy were not aware of. The gears alongside the door frame finally shifted and pulled the door apart to reveal the hallway that would lead to the gemstone room.

"Wow," Daisy said, impressed. "What made you think of that?"

"Water is meant to mix," Warra replied.

The door revealed a long hallway illuminated by neon blue and cyan lightstones arranged in a perfect pattern. They walked along the hallway of which the entire left wall was made of a densely-packed, cavern-like organic and earthy material that continued down and likely lead to an exit, but opened up on the right side to the gemstone room that was about fifty yards down below. There was no railing along the edge nor was there any means of getting up and

down, meaning one would have to jump down into the room and then pull off some tricks to get back out.

The gemstone room itself was the smallest room they'd encountered so far. It was a square, dark blue room that would've been more accurately described as a pit, and was only about seventy yards wide all-around. There was a central platform surrounded by a wide, square pool of water and four smaller platforms at each corner of the room. The water itself seemed to provide a large portion of the lighting in the room, as it gave off a bright blue glow that contrasted with the very dark ceiling. In an indent on the wall they were facing near the bottom of the room was the pedestal upon which the Water Gemstone rested.

A creature sensed their presence and emerged from the square pool to confront the two Moirai. The creature took up a stance at the edge of the platform in wait with its back to the Water Gemstone. It appeared as a cross between an aged man and a frog, having a mutated face resembling a lizard and long, flowing fins where his hair would be. His body was covered in black fish scales and he had webbed paws instead of hands, a fish's tail, and red-orange eyes. The creature was large; about Athelstan's size but not quite the size of Bowser. Regardless of his mass, he looked equally as menacing as he did demonic.

"That must be the guardian for this shrine that Elkon placed here," said Daisy. "The Vodyanoy that Officer April was talking about."

"More likely than not, one of us will have to drop down there while the other remains in the hallway up here," said Warra. "There's not enough room for both of us to be down there."

"I'll go down," Daisy said in a hurry. "Save your energy for the gemstone after the battle."

"If you feel the need, I think you should be able to pull some earth out from the wall behind us," Warra advised. "Although it seems limited – since the shrine is oddly enough a stone-based structure – so use it wisely."

Daisy nodded and swiftly shot down into the arena across from the

creature on the same platform. She left less than twenty yards between her and the hunched over creature. Despite his decrepit posture, he was very much alive and well.

"Are you it..." Daisy sternly asked. "Are you the Vodyanoy?"

The creature responded, saying, "Yes... I am the Vodyanoy... I am Vodyanoy." His ultra-deep voice was unfitting of his form and stature, but there was a hint of a hiss akin to that of a viper lost in his tone as well. "Have you come to die?"

"No, I've come to cleanse this shrine of fiends like you," Daisy replied, deathly serious. Her eyes shone with the ambient lighting of the room.

"So you have come to die..." said Vodyanoy. "You could not have been around for much more than two decades and you're already rushing headlong into your death..." The Vodyanoy's eyes were beady and unblinking.

"That depends on what you consider to be rushing," Daisy shot back.

"You're dressed in black and silver...so I have to assume you're an earth wielder, correct?" said Vodyanoy. "The last time I dealt with an earth wielder – I literally tore him in half."

"Well, try that on me and see what happens," Daisy replied.

Vodyanoy paused, intrigued by his opponent's lack of fear. "Interesting... All the fighters and warriors I've faced throughout the years revealed their cowardice when they attempted to face me, and all those that I have come across in this area in the short time that I have been around here were petrified in terror before I hauled them down to the great pits of the ocean... Are you made of sterner stuff?"

Daisy cocked a smile and got into her stance, as heavily aggressive as ever. "I'm definitely made of something; something you can't verbalize."

"Oh," said Vodyanoy. "Maybe so...but I *can* verbalize your... *pain* ." He dashed forward and jabbed a paw at Daisy's head. The earth

wielder made a quick spin out of the way and thrust the rigid back of her hand square into Vodyanoy's abdomen, then chained the counter attack by raising up her elbow and forcing it down into the fiend's back. She finished by bringing both fists into the air together and slamming them down in a two-handed smash attack once again right into the Vodyanoy's back. Those three blows were enough to take out a significant chunk of Vodyanoy's vitality. He tried to quickly slip away, but the moment he jumped backwards, Daisy leapt forward to stay right up in his face. With her right arm, she then initiated her Flurry Punch into Vodyanoy's chest. The string of punches came out so fast, her arm gained a motion blur. The continuous attack lasted a couple more moments before she attempted to finish with a powerful uppercut from her left hand, but Vodyanoy's reflexes were quick and there was enough of a gap in between attacks for him to dodge and move towards the center of the platform. Daisy made a massive whiff as a result, and then whipped around to regain sight of the fiend.

Vodyanoy began preparing some sort of energy attack, but got cut off when Daisy decided to rush him with her high-speed Crystal Kick she had quickly put together with the earth minerals and sediments from the hallway above where Warra stood watching. The aquatic creature sidestepped and backpedaled, only for Daisy to whip around with her opposite foot to attack yet again. Vodyanoy tried to block the kick with his arm, but there was too much force to blunt from his disadvantageous position. He was sent flying across the pit, slamming into the wall near one of the corners and tumbling onto the corner platform.

Daisy keyed in on the demon and leapt up to try and do the same arching punch on Vodyanoy that she did to essentially cripple The Crestfallen, but again, Vodyanoy recovered and bolted out of the way. Daisy ended up punching the ground, sending vibrations throughout the room on contact. The aquatic fiend leapt back to the center of the pit, and Daisy turned around to follow him and jump back to the main platform. The Moirai of Earth had not so much as broke a sweat, but Vodyanoy's stamina was faltering.

Be careful, Daisy , Warra thought to himself. *You're doing a great job pressing your strengths to your advantages, but you better be*

wary of Vodyanoy. He seems like the kind of opponent who'd be able to neutralize those strengths and expose those weaknesses and gaps in abilities you've done a good job in covering up so far...

"You," Vodyanoy muttered. "Elkon warned me about you..."

"Hmm, he did?" Daisy nonchalantly asked.

"Yes..." replied Vodyanoy. "He said that you could be quite the bother. But regardless, I'm pretty certain that I've won already..."

Daisy cupped her elbows in her hands. "You've yet to land a hit on me and you look like you've lost two-thirds of your stamina, and yet you're saying that you've won. Yes, you've won. You've won the loss."

Vodyanoy shifted towards Daisy in one super quick motion and slammed his elbow into Daisy's chin, flinging her head back. He then leapt backwards to create some distance and breathing room. For a moment, there was no movement from either person. Warra held his breath, only to see Daisy straighten her posture as she tilted her head to the side to spit out some blood.

"That one was free," Daisy said with a dirty smile.

"What the hell is this?" Vodyanoy grumbled. "Earth wielders are some of the most *boring* opponents to have to deal with, and yet here you are fighting like you're of the air instead of the earth."

"Well, that's your opinion," said Daisy. "I'm not like other earth wielders."

"Overconfident little human," the aquatic fiend growled. "You think you're so special? I've dragged plenty of your kind down, and you won't be an exception."

"You haven't shown me anything so far to make me believe that," said Daisy.

"Oh, I haven't," Vodyanoy admitted. "But perhaps if I transformed..." his eyes flashed before he finished, saying, "You'd see how hopeless your situation truly is!"

"What..." Daisy murmured. "Transforming..."

"Yes," Vodyanoy said, practically hissing. "You see, what you are dealing with now is my base form that I stay in to deal with the typical human dreck that I come across on a daily basis. But apparently, I can't afford to waste energy and health dealing with you in this state. You're in a league of your own, there's no doubting that. I will admit, you're definitely one of the more worthy of adversaries I have encountered to date, but that doesn't mean anything because as you can see, I'm still standing here alive and well."

"Then transform already!" Daisy shouted. "That's just disrespectful for me to be trying my best and be wailing on you when you're not even trying yourself."

"Daisy! Be careful down there!" Warra called from above. "Don't fall for any of his mind tricks! He might be trying to bait you!"

"Maybe you should listen to your friend," said Vodyanoy. "I personally don't like transforming because it creates quite a strain on my system, but it makes no difference to me because the power increase...is well worth it..."

"Oh, I'm so scared," Daisy said, glancing around the room.

"What?!" Vodyanoy shrieked. "You've got some nerve talking like that to me..."

Warra looked on from up at the edge of the pit, anxious and uneasy. *Something doesn't feel right about this creature* , he thought.

"But you seem so eager for crushing defeat," Vodyanoy continued. "I feel compelled to give you what you're asking for."

Daisy said nothing and stood with a fiercely stoic face, her arms still folded, not sensing any need to put up her guard. An eerie pause ensued for just a moment, tension rising in the undertone of the Water Gemstone room.

"So," Vodyanoy began. "Would you like to plead for mercy and beg for your life? It sometimes helps a bit but not often..."

"Just transform," Daisy said with impatience.

"Alright," said Vodyanoy. "Here goes, you helpless fool."

Vodyanoy got into a power stance and began flashing. The room itself then subtly flashed in unison with Vodyanoy's flashing. A faint yellow-green glow became visible around his body and audibly pulsated. His eyes changed from red-orange to a deep crimson and gained golden pupils. His body enlarged just a tad, and his scales changed shade from a solid black to a shiny, metallic gray. Then, in a matter of moments, the flashing ceased and Vodyanoy stood.

"Now, let's begin round two," the aquatic creature said with a hiss.

Chapter XV

The Nightmare of Pristine Bay :

In the gemstone pit of the Water Shrine, a standoff ensued between Vodyanoy and Daisy. The aquatic fiend looked somewhat rejuvenated from his transformation, the underlying shifting of bones and cartilage having altered his form and posture for the better. Daisy stared him down, stern and unimpressed. The scales of the Vodyanoy shined and reflected the light that was coming up from the water around them. The aquatic creature let out a content huff of breath as his body settled into his powered-up form, but Daisy started to show some agitation.

"So?" Daisy gruffly said with distaste. "Who do you think you're fooling? You grew two inches and turned your scales gray! You call that a transformation?"

Vodyanoy didn't respond for a moment, but then chuckled softly. "It's been quite a while since I've been in this form," he said, his voice even deeper than it was before. "So forgive me if I don't remember what I look like. Forgive me also for what I'm about to do to your bones."

Vodyanoy rushed forward at Daisy and kneed her in the midsection, then kneed her again with the opposite knee to lift her up off the ground, finishing the combo with a bicycle kick that sent her up near the ceiling. At the apex of her height, Daisy tucked into a rapidly revolving, continuous somersault that forced her back to the ground faster, then broke out of the move halfway down. Vodyanoy attempted to meet her descent with an uppercut, but Daisy bent backwards as she came down to avoid the attack and then countered with a leg sweep at his ankles upon landing. She knocked Vodyanoy off of his feet, but as he fell forward, he caught himself with his hands and pushed off the ground for a flip away from his opponent.

Daisy rushed at Vodyanoy as he came out of his maneuver and

attacked him with another Flurry Punch chain. He took dozens of hits before breaking the combo with a sweeping chop that sent her stumbling backwards a few feet. She jumped at Vodyanoy before even regaining her balance to attempt a two-handed smash, but the creature blocked the attack and jammed his fist into Daisy's waist. She backflipped out of the hitstun, anticipating a followup attack from Vodyanoy which was already in motion. His fist went right for Daisy's neck, but she crossed her arms up to block the strike. Vodyanoy used his other hand to deliver a hook that caught Daisy in the shoulder, knocking her to the side but not off her feet. She countered with a monstrous hook of her own, a sweeping wide swing that covered a range equal to two-thirds of a circle and forced her body forward at the end of the motion as a result of the massive momentum. Vodyanoy just barely inched himself out of the way and skipped backwards to the edge of the platform.

"Alright, a real fight," said Daisy with a forceful huff. "That's better..."

"You better be careful Daisy," Warra murmured from the hallway at the top of the pit.

Daisy took a lateral step to the right and got ready to charge forward at Vodyanoy, but the creature charged at her *first* and attempted to land a powerful jab in her face. She contorted her body out of the way and grabbed the creature's outstretched arm, then pulled the creature in to get a hold of him. She jumped to lift the two of them into the air and made a couple of front flips that ended in a suplex. She released her hold and backflipped away to create some distance.

Vodyanoy was shaken up from the attack, but still got up anyways. Daisy gathered seismic energy in her right hand, looking to fire off a short-range blast. Vodyanoy saw this and jumped to the platform in the corner behind her, then continued jumping between the main platform and the four corner platforms. Daisy could not get any sort of aim, so she canceled her blast and instead followed Vodyanoy to one of the corner platforms. She put out a high kick, only for Vodyanoy to roll along the ground and avoid the strike. The creature then put down a blow to her sternum with his fist, sending the Moirai of Earth skipping across the water pool and back onto the main platform.

Daisy tried to pick herself up quickly enough to avoid any incoming attack, but was too slow and got stomped on in the back once Vodyanoy hurtled over to the main platform. Before he could stomp on her again, she pressed herself off the ground into a handstand to avoid the attack and then pushed off the floor through her palms to avoid the creature's leg sweep. Vodyanoy immediately transitioned out of his leg sweep into a hearty palm strike that made contact in Daisy's abdomen, causing her to fall to the ground on her back some fifteen feet away from her opponent. She laid there for a moment, somewhat stunned by the hits she had taken from the creature.

"C'mon, get up," Vodyanoy mocked. "What's wrong – don't tell me that the mighty earth wielder that is on the ground before me is about to give up? All that talk, and now, look where you are..."

Daisy's eyes went wide. *GET UP!* she yelled in her mind. She instantly pushed herself off the ground and back to her feet in one swift motion and sprang forward with impressive quickness at Vodyanoy. With a fiercely gritty face, she forced her elbow into the creature's chest, causing him to wheeze and gag as he flopped on his back.

"I don't give up," Daisy bitterly murmured.

Vodyanoy snapped back to his feet, mildly irritated. "You should," he quipped. "I've evened this playing field. In fact, if anything, I'm in control of this fight."

Daisy grimaced in response. She got herself ready to move, expecting a retaliatory effort from the aquatic fiend, and she did not want to risk getting thrown in the water.

"But I will give you credit for causing me this much difficulty..." Vodyanoy said. "You're good, definitely one of the best that I've faced in a while. I'll enjoy shoving you down into the abyss. The water will turn red with your blood..."

Daisy flared a smile and brought her hands up to forehead level in preparation for her next attack. *This is great* , she thought. *What a challenge this is turning out to be . Too bad he's trying to kill me, or*

he would've made a great sparring partner.

Vodyanoy's eyes flashed. "And now, we see how well you can survive being prey...to the predator..."

Daisy frowned, noticing that something in the atmosphere felt out of place. Vodyanoy let out a boisterous laugh and leapt high into the air. Her gaze trailed the aquatic creature as he dropped down into the water. He did not come back up, but apparently, that seemed to be the point.

Daisy's eyes flared fiercely in alarm. *I can't sense him at all now that he's underwater!* she yelled in thought. She clenched her jaw, trying in vain to look around in all directions to try and spot or at least even hear her enemy. The water pool in the pit was no longer standing, and Vodyanoy was doing a very good job of masking his movements. Vodyanoy cut through the water with ease, maneuvering underneath in near silence despite moving more than twice as fast as an Olympic swimmer.

Daisy could not even come up with an idea of where the fiend could be. Warra was too high up for him to make out any definite shape underwater, especially considering how well the creature blended in with the pool in the relatively low lighting. The Moirai of Earth kept trying to get even the slightest indication of where her opponent was until she heard him spring up out of the water from the right. She turned in time to see him kick her in the upper back across the platform just to return to the pool of water as quickly as he appeared. She pounded her feet onto the platform to regain control of herself and then surveyed the area, angered to see that Vodyanoy was back underwater.

"Well, I guess I gotta play 'whack-an-aquatic-demon' now," Daisy sardonically remarked.

Once again, Vodyanoy was concealed underneath the water pool. Daisy had to be very careful dealing with this creature, since the pool of water took up half the surface area of the pit and there was no telling how far down in depth it stretched...if there even was a bottom to it. Several seconds passed without any sudden movements, but then Vodyanoy hopped out of the water again on

her right and put a hook into her jaw before rolling along the ground and back into the water. Daisy whipped around to try and catch sight of the creature, only to see that he was already gone. She grunted in frustration and irritation from the attacks being made in concealment.

Settle down, Daisy , she thought. *I'm not going to be able to detect him if I don't focus. I need to try and zero in on where he is, not where he could be. Otherwise, I'm just going to keep guessing, and then get picked-off because of it.*

She took up position in the center of the main platform to avoid being so close to the edge. Several more seconds passed and Vodyanoy shot out of the water again, this time on her right. The creature looked to slash Daisy's head with his paw, but luckily, Daisy ducked down just quick enough to evade the swipe and hit Vodyanoy square in the jaw with a spinning uppercut. The hit caused the creature to stumble backwards a few steps, though he kept his balance. Daisy got into stance in anticipation of an incoming attack, but the fiend straightened his body and looked at the earth wielder, sharply saying, "That one was free."

Daisy gasped and then scowled at the aquatic fiend as she brought forward a blazing fast smash punch. Yet again, Vodyanoy slipped around the fist and dove back into the water.

This is not looking good at all , Warra thought. *She does best when she can put as much strength and speed into her attacks as she can so that her opponent doesn't have a chance to attack or even retaliate, but now that her opponent has made it so that she can't attack, she's powerless... I have to step in...*

"Warra!" Daisy called out. "I know what you're thinking! Whatever happens here, do not interfere! Just stay up there!"

"But, Daisy!" exclaimed Warra.

"You listen to me!" Daisy barked. "I claimed this fight, not you! If you come down here before this fight's over, I'm throwing you back up!"

Warra flinched at Daisy's command. Unable to come up with

anything to say, he remained where he was. His mouth hung open, trying to put together some form of speech, but failed to do so.

Daisy moved back into the center of the platform and waited for the next incoming attack from the creature. Several seconds passed and nothing happened. Daisy kept still, her eyes darting across the arena and her ears trying to pick up anything behind her. Several more seconds elapsed and still, nothing happened.

If I didn't know any better, I would've thought you had drowned yourself for once, the Moirai of Earth thought.

More time passed, and still nothing at all happened. Then without warning, Vodyanoy emerged from the water behind Daisy with blistering quickness, grabbed her by the arm, whipped her around in a full circle, and threw her across the pit arena. She slammed into the middle of the wall opposite the gemstone pedestal, the impact causing the water pool to tremble a bit. About to fall into the water, she used her Crystal Grip to cling onto the wall and prevent her from dropping down. Vodyanoy stood on the center platform for a moment before reentering the water.

Wait a minute, she thought. *I can wall cling to the sides of the walls so that way, I can get at least an idea of where this demon'll show up. Since I'll be against the wall, he can't show up anywhere that's not in my field of vision. Right now, I have sight over the whole pool. In this position, I should be able to react once he decides to pop out of the water again...*

The eerie silence returned, but Daisy was able to see some blurry and distorted form swirling about underneath the water. So when Vodyanoy leapt out and up at Daisy, she was ready to counter. She twisted her hips upwards so that she could whip her whole lower body down in a reverse double kick that sent the creature plummeting back into the water. She then jumped from her wall over to the middle of the wall opposite the hallway where Warra was watching and waited.

After a few more moments, Vodyanoy appeared from underneath Daisy and attempted to grab her. Swift and sure, Daisy threw herself across the wall to avoid the creature. She then jumped off the wall

back onto the main platform and dashed to the edge to jump and cling to the opposite wall. When she looked back into the arena, Vodyanoy was once again back underneath the water. He came up on the main platform and stood there, watching his opponent maintain her cling to the wall.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Vodyanoy called out. "You think you're some sort of comic book character now?"

"That depends; do you think you're some sort of dolphin?!" Daisy slyly shot back.

Vodyanoy's eyes flashed again before he backflipped back into the water. Daisy kept up on the wall, though she knew she had to get down at some point because her forearms were getting fatigued from gripping the wall and supporting her weight. She jumped to her right onto the corner platform for a couple moments to relieve the burn in her hands and arms and then tried to get up onto the adjacent wall, but the aquatic fiend leapt out of the pool in time to latch onto her wrist and yank her down into the water.

Warra froze in terror. Taking the fight into the water was the worst possible thing that could happen. The blue-clothed fighter's face started to redden in guilt. "I should've taken this fight, not Daisy..." he mumbled to himself.

Daisy furiously kicked to stop herself from descending further into the water and tried to push herself up to the surface. She did not make it back up once the aquatic fiend swam in front of her and cut her off. Vodyanoy then began bolting back and forth through the water, repeatedly slamming himself into Daisy. The earth wielder did all she could to hold her breath in between the blows.

Damn it, what the hell am I going to do? She angrily screamed in her mind. *C'mon!*

A bulldozing hit came from Vodyanoy nearly every two seconds. In a matter of moments, Daisy would run out of air if she didn't do anything quick. She could feel her head and lungs beginning to burn and pressure starting to accumulate in her throat. Her mind was now frantically trying to come up with a way to force herself back to the

surface.

That's it! she exclaimed in her head. *But if this doesn't work, I'm dead!*

Daisy began to focus and create an aura of seismic energy all around her body, causing the water around her to shake and rumble. Soon, the shaking and rumbling expanded and became notably violent. The now field of seismic forces made Vodyanoy cancel his assault, unable to deal with the constant rumbling that was now occurring in the pool. Water started forcing its way into Daisy's lungs, but she kept releasing the earthly energy as fast and as forceful as she could. The rumbling and shaking of the water caused a massive disruption that forced both Daisy and Vodyanoy back up to the surface.

Now free from the depths of the large pool, Daisy threw herself onto the main platform and cut off her outflow of energy. Vodyanoy was partially stunned and dazed, both physically from the shaking as well as mentally from the unexpected tactic. Daisy rolled over onto her stomach, coughing and gagging to spit out and clear the fluid that had accumulated in her lungs. Vodyanoy didn't take long to recover and vaulted up onto the platform, dishing out a spin kick that Daisy could not defend herself against. The attack sent her hurtling into the wall opposite the gemstone pedestal. Upon impact, she stuck her hands to the wall to hold her position and prevent from falling back into the water, although her body absorbed all of the shock from the collision as a result.

The amount of pain that had accumulated from the dozens of hits she had taken above ground, the thrashing under the water, and now the bone-jarring contact from the wall all were taking its toll on her body, making her pant heavily. Vodyanoy had already went back underwater now that the pool had calmed down. Daisy, in excruciating pain, was down to her last bit of energy, so when Vodyanoy leapt up at her once more, she did the first thing that came to mind. She closed her eyes and pulled her body up so that she was crouched on the wall upside down and used that position to launch herself into the creature at high speed, leading with her shoulder and slamming into him as if she were a human torpedo. The water demon took the hit head on and dropped in terminal

velocity down into the water. Daisy made an erratic front flip to give her momentum towards the main platform and made a hard crash landing, bouncing to the other side of the platform and sprawling out on the ground.

"Daisy!" Warra called out. "Get up!"

Daisy shakily forced herself up onto her feet, panting and wincing in immense discomfort. Vodyanoy pulled himself out of the water to join and stand across from her on the central platform. That last shot he took had dealt a great deal of damage to his body, but he was still alive and well.

"Impressive," Vodyanoy murmured. "No one has pushed Vodyanoy this far. You have guts. Unrivaled guts." His eyes flashed as he added, "...But those will soon be spewed underneath the water."

"While...I'd like to say that this was a stalemate...I don't think I can get away with that," Daisy muttered with a sly grin. "But the fight's still on."

"Yes... However unfortunate for you that it *is* still on, for you are far too weak-" Vodyanoy shouted. He rushed behind Daisy and struck her with a firm hand chop that sliced through the air as it made contact with her upper back. She fell forward and skidded across the platform, coming to rest with her head and arms hanging off the edge and in the water. "...To continue," he finished.

Daisy did not get up from the devastating hit. Fortunately, Vodyanoy did not advance towards her even though nothing was stopping him from doing so.

"Elkon is in the right state of mind, you know," said Vodyanoy. "I'm glad he enlisted me. I've hated you humans for a while now. I take special solace in every victim of mine I drag down under the ocean. All your kind has been good for is polluting the waters of this planet with your waste and filth. You prosper on the surface, and yet you pay no mind to the animals and lifeforms underneath you that have to deal with the garbage that you don't want to be held accountable for. Well no more..."

Warra watched from above, wondering if he should obey Daisy's wishes and stay up in the hallway or defy them and save her from the creature. As if an answer to his thoughts, she somehow managed to get up again and back to standing. But even with that showing, she looked like one more hit might put her down for good.

"Stay up there, Warra!" Daisy suddenly shouted, aware that no doubt her partner must be at the very least contemplating jumping in. Her command startled Warra, who could not bring himself to move or say anything.

"Don't try to act tough; I can tell that you're wasted," Vodyanoy said to Daisy, who only smiled in response. He then added, "Oh, so you're aware of it as well..."

"You'll take your honor and pride to your grave, won't you, Daisy?" Warra managed to cry out. "You don't want me to help out at all...but you've helped us out before when we've been in the same situation that you're in right now. Why can't you just admit that you need some help? Yes, we need to keep honor and fight a fair fight to the end, but the end of a fight is long before the point in which you die – What are you trying to prove through taking this so far?"

"Hush your mouth, boy," Vodyanoy hissed. "It's not my fault she has a death wish. Don't be so impatient; you'll be dealt with after I finish with her."

"You think this is about pride?" Daisy furiously asked. "Please...just shut up."

"This isn't just your battle, this is *our* battle!" Warra pleaded. "You're not doing this alone! You don't have to do everything alone! Please, just let me take over! Why are you so insistent on continuing?"

Daisy's face flared up in rage before responding, "Because I CAN! AND I WILL!" As if a flip switched inside her soul, a vibrant and lively aura began pulsating from Daisy's body as she let loose a roar from deep within. Vodyanoy and Warra both were taken aback by the sudden and unforeseen development.

"You people are all alike!" Daisy yelled, her screaming anger

straining her already raspy voice. "Trying to tell me who I am, what I can and can't do, who I am supposed to be – but you're wrong! YOU'RE ALL WRONG!" It was as if her eyes housed two ferocious lions. The tension in her face, although massive, did not tell the whole story of the fury leaking from inside of her.

It was at that moment that Warra then realized what had been driving Daisy so far into both this fight and her fit of fury. "...This has to do with your mother and father, doesn't it..." he murmured to himself.

Vodyanoy looked on at the silvery aura flowing from and around his opponent's body. "...It seems you've gotten some of your energy back," he said with intrigue. "...It makes no difference though...how much energy you've recovered, how much you have left, or how much you still haven't tapped into... I'm still largely in control."

Interestingly enough, Vodyanoy maintained his position, still not making any advances towards the enraged Daisy. Her incensed face was all too visible through her pulsating aura. She stood like a wild, savage wolf ready to pounce on its prey. Her energy sounded identical to the noise from an earthquake.

"I should just kill you right where you stand," said Vodyanoy. "But that would make this far too simple. A special opponent like you needs more than that..."

The Moirai of Earth said nothing. Her maddened posture and irate expression intensified by the second as she stared down the creature and brought both hands up to forehead height, ready to assault.

"I have something much better in mind," Vodyanoy murmured. "I want to savor this victory. This will be a grand day indeed."

Daisy... Warra thought. *This is it ... If you truly wish for this to be your fate, then I cannot stand in your way...*

Surprisingly, Vodyanoy then straightened up his stance. "No... I'm not going to kill you, not yet, even though I could just do it now with a little more effort. First, I will make this even more painful for you

than it already is – since you have been unable to stop me tonight, I will now go into Delight City and plunge every person in my sight into the depths of the ocean as feed for the creatures of the deep. Their deaths will then be on your hands; you will be responsible for failing to defeat me when you had the chance...even though you never had that chance in the first place! And then, I shall return to kill you and you will die in regretful remorse for failing to protect all who I slaughter tonight."

"What?!" Daisy grunted. Her energy outflow ceased and retracted back inside of her.

Vodyanoy made an incredibly powerful jump to get out of the pit and dashed past Warra down the hallway. He went not in the direction of the door Daisy and Warra had originally come through, but down the other end to where the exit was.

Daisy looked at Warra and yelled, "Hurry up and get down here so we can purify this shrine and go after that demon!"

The Moirai of Water leapt onto the main platform and handed the mirror to Daisy. She aimed the lens as accurately as she could at the indent in the wall and Warra channeled as much of his elemental water energy into the mirror as he could to speed up the process. The energy magnified through the lens and bombarded the Water Gemstone. Thanks to the added energy, the purification was complete in under half a minute.

"It's done," Warra confirmed. The bright and pure glow from the Water Gemstone gave all the proof that was needed at that moment.

"Then come on and let's go!" Daisy shouted, handing the mirror back over to Warra. She used her Crystal Grip to help her wall jump back up to the hallway and then bolted in the direction of the aquatic demon. Warra paused for a second, full of worry and anxiety over what he had witnessed transpire in this arena. He was lost in thought for a little while, but then came back out from his mind, jumping into the pool and manipulating the mass of water to catapult himself up into the hallway. He then dashed down the hallway in the direction Vodyanoy and Daisy ran in.

Chapter XVI

Vodyanoy on the Loose! :

Daisy darted down the hallway, Warra not too far behind her. Vodyanoy was not within sight, but the hallway didn't break off into any separate sections so there was no other place for the aquatic demon to go but straight ahead. She stopped once she came to the exit and noticed the moon overhead. Warra caught up and saw that they were at the base of one of the stone towers that they had seen from the outside before entering the shrine. The exit was a chain of spiraling stairs that went up all the way to and then above the surface, continuing to wrap around one of the stone towers all the way up to the bridge connecting the two towers. Daisy and Warra ran up the stairs to begin their ascent to the surface and up the tower.

"It's nice to know that this shrine actually has an exit," said Warra. "Better than backtracking all the way back to the entrance like the previous three."

"Yeah," said Daisy. "But in this case, it's bad because it's an easy exit for this demon as well."

Warra nodded. "This must be the exit that Vodyanoy uses to come out from the shrine and commit his drownings and killings! It certainly seems like a quicker way than going out through the entrance we came in."

"If he's gotten too far ahead, I can outrun him and catch up to him pretty quickly."

"Even if we catch up to Vodyanoy, whether that's both of us or if you have to sprint forward to get to him, how certain are we that we can stop him?"

"We have to try."

About two-thirds of the way up the tower, they caught sight of

Vodyanoy dashing across the connecting bridge. The demon seemed to be looking to get down the flight of stairs on the other tower, which would put him right in line with Pristine Bay. Using the humidity in the air, Warra formed the same water bullets he had used before on Daisy and fired them off at the aquatic creature from his daggers. The nighttime sky made it hard for the projectiles to be seen, but unfortunately, Warra overshot the bullets just in front of Vodyanoy. The water demon turned around to see the two Moirai heading up the remainder of the winding staircase and decided to stop and wait for them.

"He's stopping?" Warra asked in surprise.

"Just c'mon!" Daisy angrily yelled.

Only a few more moments passed before Daisy and Warra made it up to the bridge to stand face to face once again with the water demon. The fiend stood tall upon seeing the arrival of his opponents and gave a disgustingly demented laugh.

"How many can I kill off?" said Vodyanoy. "Let's see, a bronze medal could require two hundred, four hundred for silver, nine hundred for gold...two thousand for platinum? Let's not forget the bonus points afterwards for extra...and the ranking – let's see if I can get a triple-star..." He paused for a moment. "Then again, what's stopping me from ransacking the entire city?… Not you two..."

"You kill a single soul tonight, I'm killing you!" Daisy declared.

"Empty threats," said Vodyanoy. "I've already demonstrated that I can handle you, so I'll deal with you after I've had my binge as I have already determined I would. Or are you a masochist?"

"It's not masochistic when I'm the one beating you up," Daisy shot back.

Vodyanoy got irritated. "Are you really as fearless as your actions have been projecting tonight, or is your IQ lower than that of a piranha plant?"

"My IQ's fine! I got an associate's degree in asskicking!" Daisy said,

getting into stance.

"That must be why you're able to tolerate one so well," said Vodyanoy. In one lightning quick motion, he zipped forward at Daisy before she even had time to realize it and kneed her in the abdomen, knocking all the air out of her body. She slumped to her knees and then her elbows, but refused to go all the way down. Warra attempted to drive his twin daggers into the water demon but caught a spin kick from the creature instead that sent him flying back into the tower wall. Vodyanoy looked down at Daisy who, in spite of all the damage and pain she had taken that night, was still trying to get back up.

"You must have a strong will for you to still be trying to get up," Vodyanoy acknowledged. "Persistent annoyance – why can't you just fall over and die like everyone else? At least go comatose!"

"...Because...I'm not finished yet," Daisy angrily grunted, still on two knees but now up on one hand. She was visibly trembling, unable to control the shaking caused from her loss of stability.

"Well, sit tight, and I'll be back to finish you then," Vodyanoy said turning to take off. He dashed across the almost island-wide bridge and down the stairs of the opposite tower. Warra got back to his feet and ran over to his teammate.

"Damn it!" Daisy screamed out in pain. "I gotta stop him..." On nothing but sheer willpower alone, she managed to get back to standing despite everything in her body telling her to keel over and pass out. She then miraculously took off running to chase down Vodyanoy, Warra following right behind her.

Vodyanoy had descended all the flights of stairs on the other tower to get to ground level, making his way for the small island's coastline. Daisy and Warra were just starting down the stairs when they saw the creature dart across the island ground, forcing them into a sprint to try and catch up. Once they were down half the stairs, they made another round about down the tower and jumped off the staircase to make up ground. They landed and rolled along the ground to negate most of the shock from the drop height and kept running down the aquatic creature, but it was all for not.

Vodanoy got to the coastline, stopped and turned his head back to eye the two fighters, and then dashed across the water in the direction of Pristine Bay, maniacally laughing all the way.

"What the..." Warra stuttered in shock. "I can't even do that! What kind of being did Elkon put here? Do you think he knew how primal and sadistic this creature was when he appointed him to guard the Water Shrine?"

"Do you think he even cares?" Daisy grunted out. "It was probably a bonus that they shared a hatred for human kind!"

The two ran across the island as fast as they could manage and made it back to where Officer April and the boat. The policewoman looked beyond spooked when they saw her.

"I just saw a creature dart past the boat, heading straight for the city!" exclaimed Officer April. "Was that the Vodyanoy?"

"Yeah," said Warra, helping Daisy into the boat before getting in himself. "Start up the boat so we can get to him, quickly!"

Officer April raised the anchor and punched the gas to get the boat speeding on its way back to the mainland. "Officer Cappa contacted me to let you know that they've successfully captured the Mafio Brothers and a large portion of their henchmen. I'm going to tell them to institute an immediate citywide curfew to keep everyone inside and hidden from the Vodyanoy. I'll also contact your team to have them ready should any one of them encounter him."

"The Water Gemstone has been taken care off," Warra told Officer April. "So the water level of the ocean should slowly start to recede back to its normal height and you shouldn't have to worry about any tsunamis or citywide floods. Unfortunately, that aquatic demon is moving at an absurdly fast pace, considerably faster than it seems this boat is even capable of going."

"He's already out of sight," Daisy muttered. "He'll be ashore in under a minute at this rate..."

After a moment of silence in the boat, Warra turned to the earth

wielder, saying, "I'm sorry, Daisy."

"For what?" the Moirai of Earth asked.

"I should've been fighting that creature, not you," Warra said. "I should've asserted for me to fight it before you went to confront it; I was the best suited for it. But because I didn't, you were put in a lot of unnecessary danger. He almost killed you."

"Warra, I wasn't even thinking about any of that," said Daisy. "We're all put in a lot of danger no matter who fights who. There's no getting around that. We just each gotta try our hardest and hope for the best."

"Well, yes, that's true," said Warra. "But why, Daisy? Why were you so intent on not handing over your fight?"

Daisy lowered her head in a subtle frown. She gave no reply.

"I could've taken over and fought in your place," said Warra.

"...I should be the one apologizing," she said, low in tone. "I'm sorry, Warra. I can't say."

Warra couldn't come up with a response. He didn't know what he could say to a statement like that. He thought back to seeing her fury erupt in the Water Shrine, and thought back to how he was at a loss for words then just as he is now. Eventually, he conceded and decided that this was something that Daisy had to sort out herself. *That's all I can do,* he thought.

Beaten, battered, bruised, but refusing to be defeated, Daisy stared at the shore of Delight City off in the distance. She had calmed down substantially from her state of mind in the Water Shrine, though remained as determined as ever.

If an opponent in battle doesn't kill you, then whatever is going on inside of you will , Warra thought to himself. "Here," he then said to Daisy, pulling out his bottle of healing water. "You could use some of this."

Daisy didn't say anything for a while, her eyes still stuck on the

coastline that was blurred by the nighttime darkness. *This boat can't get there fast enough,* she thought. *I just have to be ready for whatever is waiting for us when we get there. If bleeding out on the surf is going to guarantee that I can stop him, then that's what I'll have to do. If I cant beat this water demon, then what chance do I have against Elkon?... This is going to be big...bigger than everyone else thinks...*

Daisy was quiet for a couple more moments,but then finally murmured in response to Warra, "Sure... Thanks."

Vodyanoy rocketed to the shore and leapt up onto a seaside street, looking ready to slaughter the first person he saw. What he was not prepared for was a person appearing from around a nearby intersection to stand against Vodyanoy, preventing the demon from advancing any further. The icy entity was blonde with large blue eyes and looked really young. For a moment, Vodyanoy could not tell if it was a man or a woman confronting him, but then realized it was just an effeminate man who appeared very androgynous. His hair was in chunky layers with side-swept bangs. He had on a white midriff jacket with a light blue shirt underneath and white pants with two silver stripes running along each leg from the waist to the knees. On his feet were mid-cut boots in silver with light blue details, and on the large buckle of his silver belt was the ice symbol. He possessed twin forearm machetes that he carried on his back, likely to help focus the absurd amount of energy flowing throughout his body.

"Get out of my way," Vodyanoy sharply demanded.

The man said nothing at first, but when he replied, he gave a subtle and absolute, "No." His gruff voice sounded like it was halfway gone with no hope of ever being revived.

"What?" Vodyanoy asked in annoyance. "No? Oh, I see, because you want me to drown you... I'll waste no time then. I have some errands I need to run, and since you're refusing to get out of my way like I *told* you to, you'll be the first 'errand' to fall tonight!"

Vodyanoy rushed forward and brought up a powerful hook to the

white-clothed man's jaw, knocking his head as far right as it would turn. His body jolted from the attack but his feet did not move. He then brought his head back around, looking bored.

"Your face looks broken," said Vodyanoy. "It's supposed to look like pain and torment."

"No, it's not," the man softly rejected. "Why would you think something like that..."

Vodyanoy scowled at the man's lack of reaction from the attack. The aquatic demon circled around behind the man and attempted to kick him in his middle back to send him flying out into the water. However, the man shifted out of the way with grace and countered with a kick of his own, bashing his foot into Vodyanoy's face and knocking the creature off his feet.

"I've already dealt with people and beings like you," the man coldly said. "Please; I kindly ask for you to leave here." Every time he talked, it sounded like a grating whisper. His voice seemed like it was meant to be forever as faint as it was coarse, matching his somber and depressive lack of emotion on a face that seemed longing for something.

"Yes," Vodyanoy scoffed, getting back to his feet. "Because it was so kind of you to put your foot in my face like that. You should tame your tongue before I ruin your delicate features."

"Please...just leave here," said the man. "I've seen enough death already... I don't need to see yours as well."

Vodyanoy chuckled at the man's statement. "You've seen enough death already; that's too bad! That's how the world works in this day and age. Death is all-around and in abundance! So if you don't want to see anymore death, then you shouldn't be alive."

The blonde-haired man said nothing in response. He only stared at the creature with his seemingly eternal sad expression.

"Now," Vodyanoy began to ask with intrigue. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but did I just hear *you* threaten to kill *me* ?"

The white-clothed being held up a hand and near-instantaneously materialized a thick ice shard that he proceeded to use to stab Vodyanoy in the neck with, then formed and jammed an icicle through his abdomen just as fast and clear to the other side. More quick-freezing of the air's humidity created another ice shard, this one longer than the rest, that the man used to impale the water demon's head from the top down. He then conjured a wall of ultra-hardened ice and struck the water demon with it, slamming the creature far out into the bay where his body would sink.

"It wasn't a threat..." the man in white murmured. He dispelled the remaining ice and suppressed his energy, adding nothing more.

By this time, Officer April's boat had just pulled to shore. Daisy, Warra, and Officer April had all witnessed Vodyanoy's body skip past them and lifelessly plummet below the water after coming to a stop. None of them were expecting Vodyanoy to come back up after that lethal string of attacks.

"Is that woman with you guys?" Officer April asked.

"I don't know..." Daisy replied.

"She must be if she did *that* to the Vodyanoy," Warra said. The boat pulled ashore, and all three passengers disembarked. They stood facing the white-clothed fighter, taller than them all yet lighter as well.

Warra would be the one to start the conversation. "We're grateful that you were able to rid both the city and the shrine of that demonic creature."

"And so quickly too!" Daisy added.

"I don't deserve praise," the man replied. "There was no one here to guard against the creature. I did what I was supposed to do. The quickest way to victory is through your opponent's weakest point."

After all the time I spent fighting that thing, she sends that demon plummeting to the depths in no time at all , Daisy thought with an intense expression. *This girl's legit...*

"So you don't know her?" Officer April asked Warra. The man did not react to the incorrect pronoun.

"No; never seen her before in my life," said Warra.

"Well, we know her now," the Moirai of Earth said. She waved a hand at the man and gestured to her water counterpart. "I'm Daisy, and this is Warra!"

"Are you the earth and water wielders chosen by destiny?" the white-clothed man asked, basing his assumption on Daisy and Warra's attire.

"Yeah, and you're the ice wielder, right?" Daisy asked. "Wow, you're *so* pretty! You must be a model or something back home right!" Her remark made the ice wielder's eyes flare open. "Isn't she beautiful, Warra?"

"Oh yeah, most definitely," Warra said with a smile. The ice wielder then started blushing as his body tightened up.

"You actually remind me of my cousin," Officer April said to the ice wielder. "Boy, did all the guys used to swoon over her in high school!"

The man in white blushed harder, his face contorting into a grimace as sweat started beading down his face. Daisy, Warra, and Officer April all took notice of the ice wielder's discomfort and stared at him with innocent concern.

"What?" Daisy asked taking notice. "Did one of us say something wrong?"

"I'm a man," the ice wielder grunted. The reveal made Warra and Officer April flip over on their faces.

"What?!" Daisy shouted, now blushing herself. "Oh no – I am so sorry! I didn't know, er, I didn't think, er uh, I mean, your hair and your face and your hips and the jacket – oh, oh, I am so sorry, oh my gosh-"

"My voice should've gave it away," the ice wielder said.

"It was hard to tell," Warra said, he and Officer April both getting back up. "I thought your throat was hurt or something."

"I thought you were just a smoker," Officer April said.

"Neither," the man said, then addressed Warra as he added, "At least my hair's not the same length as that of a woman's."

"Alright, I deserved that one," Warra said, smiling in embarrassment. "We're all truly sorry, my good sir."

"So, uh, what's your name, mister?" Daisy asked, making sure to get the gender correct.

"I've preferred 'Grekka' as my name," the man answered. "I was born 'Zima-Jokull,' but that name has been more of a curse than anything else."

"On behalf of all of Delight City, we thank you all for your crucial service tonight," said Officer April. "Stopping a demon and helping to lock up two of Delight City's most egregious felons are incredible feats that we can't express our gratitude enough for."

"I'm impressed, to say the least, Grekka," Daisy said. "That's some very formidable power that you've got to be able to so swiftly take down a creature like that."

"We are pleased to meet you and to welcome you onto the team, Grekka," said Warra.

"What team," Grekka half-asked. "All I see are you two and a policewoman."

"The rest of their team is resting at the Delight City Embassy Suites," Officer April said. "I had sent the order out for them to be prepared had the Vodyanoy advanced into the city, but apparently, that wasn't necessary. I'll cancel the command so they can return to the suites, and I'll take you all there in my car where you'll be able to regroup with your them and rest for the night."

"We'll be leaving first thing in the morning for the Air Shrine in the north-central region of the continent," said Warra.

"Why were they not here with you in the first place?" Grekka asked.

"Long story," said Daisy.

Chapter XVII

The Shadow Shifter and the Guiding Light! :

At the base of a remote tower built out of a combination of metal and brick six stories high stood two warriors not yet twenty years of age. The hazel-eyed and very feminine Ramona was dressed in a black boarding school-styled jacket with gold double buttons and a golden line accent pattern alongside them. Her hair was blonde with a thick shag style protruding over her forehead in the front that framed her complexion, separated from the medium-length french braid in the back by a white plastic headband over the middle of her head. It looked comical, as if she was trying to hide her face. Her outfit was complete with black and gold low-cut boots and pure white pants with a black belt. She had a golden-hilted rapier paired with a white and gold hip sheath. Her complexion was actually similar to Rosalina's but her face was small and round with larger eyes.

Her partner, Andrew, was lean and muscular with tan skin, hazel eyes just like her, and short, curly black hair with an asymmetrical fringe hanging off his forehead. He had on black pants with a purple belt and a form-fitting black shirt with four purple "talon" designs coming off his shoulders and neck, the outfit complete with black wristbands, black and white boots, and a black plastic headband he wore as a forehead protector. He possessed a long sword with a white hilt that had two talon-like projections around the bottom of the reflective black blade, the blade's sheath strapped to his back.

On top of both the shoulders of Ramona's jacket was the light symbol, and similarly, high on the sides of both the shoulders of Andrew's shirt overlapping the purple color blocks was the shadow symbol. Together, the two looked like typical light and shadow wielders, but there was nothing typical about the task that they were about to take on.

"When you're ready, we'll enter," said Ramona.

"I'm good to go," Andrew replied. "Let's do it!"

"Well, actually..." Ramona stuttered. "I... I need to tell you something...that I haven't gotten a chance to yet... I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to upset you, but...I'm a bit fearful about what might happen to us if we fail here."

"I would not think too much about it," said Andrew. "This is where we were meant to be, all along, you and I."

Ramona took a long deep breath. "If push comes to shove, and it's too much, we'll leave, right?"

Andrew nodded. "But we go in with the intention of making sure that it's not too much."

They both shared a look with a each other for a long while, almost as if they were communicating on a whole different level that transcended verbal speech. Ramona then kicked in the double door entrance, and the two elemental wielders dashed inside.

Elkon stood looking out a window on the sixth floor of the tower. Each floor was a very wide and singular room with stairs on opposite sides to ascend and descend within the building. The gothic-like interior of the cold and lonely tower matched the outside environment upon which it was set up; a dark red, rocky, flat, and barren landscape partially illuminated by a deep purple sky that tapered into a pure white horizon line. There was a throne in the room and a dresser with an empty chest on top that appeared to have served as storage for some sort of large necklace and gem, but nothing more took up any space. Insomnia negated the need for any bed, and his life force had evolved to the point of being able to self-sustain himself on air alone, without any need for food. He stood knowing that whatever awaited in the not too distant future was meant to be, and as he did so, his body responded with a brief increase in energy output. At this point, nothing mattered more to him than the things to come, things no doubt only possible because of what had already long come and past.

"So it's come to this..." Elkon muttered to himself. He had no need to turn his head from the window. He could sense Ramona and

Andrew both standing in the doorway that opened up into the room. "...How did you even get here?"

"You shouldn't have left open that portal," said Andrew.

"What portal?" Elkon asked. "The one above the Stone Shrine?"

"No, the one just south of the Light Shrine and Shadow Shrine," Ramona said.

"Of course, it's not good to hear that you have another one at the Stone Shrine too," Andrew added. "We could've also just made a portal by combining our light and shadow together, but that would've burned off a large portion of our energy, and we figured we'd save that energy to use here."

Elkon gave a slow nod. "That's right, that portal there slipped my mind, but I was sure it would be left undiscovered anyways. So...you're the destined light and shadow wielders that are supposed to stand against me? Do you even know where you've followed me to? This is the glory of the Twelfth Dimension. Not a single intelligent lifeform exists in this world. This is the one sanctuary that I have had the opportunity to retreat to throughout my entire life, and yet you have the audacity to trespass on my sacred grounds. I hope you and your lady friend are able to realize how fatal a mistake you've made by coming here."

"There's no mistake being made when fighting for righteousness and the well-being of the world!" said Andrew.

"You and your false claims of order and justice," Elkon snarled. "The Sun and Moon would frown upon you both for your abuse."

"There has been no abuse by us," said Ramona, frowning.

"Your awareness fails to see the error in your claims," Elkon said.

" *Your* awareness fails to see this attack!" Andrew shouted.

"Huh-" Elkon muttered before Andrew's shadow blast knocked him back. The darkness of the room had concealed the darkness of the energy, making for a translucent and hard to see attack. From the

disbanding shadows, Ramona leapt forward and gave the stumbling Elkon an uppercut that further pushed him back and knocked off his hood, revealing his head to the two fighters.

"So that's what you look like underneath those robes," Andrew said.

"A human," said Ramona. "I was expecting something inhuman; quite frankly, I was expecting someone related to the great witch, Cackletta."

"What if he is?" Andrew asked. "And is trying to get revenge on Mario and Luigi for destroying his relative?"

"But he looks nothing like a Beanish!" said Ramona.

"Smart, smart, smart," Elkon sarcastically muttered. "You're as bright as your element aren't you?"

Ramona scowled as a nervous sweat began to bead on her head. *Oh man, this is starting to scare me,* she thought.

"Unfortunately, this has nothing to do with Mario or his brother," Elkon said. "Their presence in the world is well known across the land, there's no denying that, but my target is on mankind as a whole. And if you weren't so blinded by bias, you'd see that the Beanish are noblemen compared to the corrupt and unjust humans that are running the world."

"What about Cackletta then?" questioned Ramona.

"There are outliers for everything," said Elkon. "Which is why what matters most is what the mean and the majority are."

"Are you allied at all with the Beanbean Kingdom?" said Andrew.

"Enough talk of the bean people!" Elkon shouted with irritation, sending a rippling blast of dense energy at Andrew. Ramona shifted in front of the shadow wielder for the save and reflected the energy with a shield of light. The reflected projectile struck the ground in front of Elkon and kicked up large chunks of the floor. Through the ensuing dust cloud and debris, Elkon's form could be seen walking through and towards the two fighters. Ramona and Andrew then

stood shoulder-to-shoulder, locking their adjacent arms together to charge a sphere of energy equal in parts light and shadow to fire off into the cloud. They heard the energy make contact and cause a residual haze of light and shadow to flare out in all directions, but once everything settled, Elkon stood. Although he seemed to have been affected by the blast in someway, it was barely noticeable.

Andrew broke the link with Ramona to jump forward. He fired off the Gemivado, a continuous stream of smothering shadows that pelted and overran its target to strip it of energy and stamina. Despite it being a Vado Blast, Elkon batted it down into the ground with his arm.

"I'd say that was a good warm-up, wouldn't you?" Elkon asked.

Andrew clenched his teeth in frustration of the string of failed moves and watched as Elkon concentrated a beam of energy into his hand. Within seconds, the pink and blue beam extended five feet and hardened into a definite, sword-like shape.

"Behold, the Dimensional Saber," said the blue-robed fiend. "You should be careful; should at any point I channel into this blade's special properties, you could end up somewhere that you never knew even existed."

Andrew unsheathed his own long sword, held in a reverse-grip fashion and got into stance to ready himself for Elkon's impending offense. He tried to hide the frustration that resulted from Elkon's defence against his Gemivado. *Vado Blasts are powerful energy techniques from each element,* he thought. *And he just batted it away like it was some basic attack from a novice...*

"This is too important to me," Elkon snarled under his breath. "I cannot allow anyone to try and terminate my plans." He dashed at Andrew, looking to stab the shadow wielder. Andrew countered with his own blade, and thanks to the leverage of his grip was able to impose his strength on Elkon's saber once the two clashed and locked on together. The shadow wielder forced Elkon backwards and made a powerful diagonal slash at the malevolent fiend, but Elkon blocked in time. Andrew threw out a horizontal slash across Elkon's midsection, only for his foe to bend his torso just out of the

way and avoid the tip of the sword by a mere inch.

"Let me jump in, Andrew!" Ramona insisted.

"No, I think I got him now!" Andrew replied. He sent his shadow energy up through his blade to increase its attacking ability and range and made a downwards vertical swipe that Elkon still managed to block overhead. A well-placed kick pushed Andrew back and away to give breathing room between the two beings. Andrew took a lateral leap to the left, followed by a long diagonal leap to the right before closing the remaining distance between them and flipping his grip to unleash a Multi-Thrust attack. Despite the impressive speed of the thrusts, Elkon maneuvered out of the way of each swipe. After only a few seconds, Elkon spun around and swiped his Dimensional Saber with torque sufficient enough to snap Andrew's blade in two right near the hilt. Andrew quickly dropped the broken hilt and cut away before Elkon made a followup move.

"Oh, did I break your sword?" Elkon murmured.

"Yeah, you kinda did!" yelled Andrew. "I only have one of those, you know!"

"I'm so sorry," said Elkon. "I meant to break you instead." He made a short leap to the right and swung his saber upwards at the shadow wielder. On this particular swipe, Andrew noticed the shining exo-glow that the sword emitted and intuitively made an aerial backflip to jump away and evade the blade and create distance. Right where Andrew just was, a dimensional rift opened up and expanded into a semi-circular portal. For a while, nothing happened, but then a figure with a certain well-known shape to its form shot out of the portal and landed in front of Elkon.

"Mario?" Ramona asked. "Is that actually Mario?"

"No, it's a metallic version of Mario," Andrew said. The figure that had emerged from the portal was an animated, metal body in the exact shape of Mario, a reflective and opaque metallic silver outlining its form.

"The things you can find in Subspace..." Elkon cooed with

admiration. "I found this being not too long ago; Metal Mario, a metal embodiment of the renowned fire wielder from the Mushroom Kingdom. Unfortunately for you, it's a cold and ruthless killing machine, just like all the other humans of the world..."

"I've had enough of you and your egregious claims!" Ramona shouted. Anxious, she channeled her light energy through her rapier and fired it off at the metal frame. The beam of energy struck Metal Mario but was reflected off its body and to the wall.

"What happened?" Ramona asked, confused. "Metal Mario didn't even do anything!" She readied more light energy through her rapier with a heftier charge compared to her first blast.

"Ramona, I don't think we can use energy attacks against this being," said Andrew. "If its body was able to reflect that first blast, it's almost certain it'll reflect any other form of energy you throw at it."

"Very good observation," said Elkon. "And since light and shadow are both energy-based elements like fire is, you're not going to be able to use your elements to attack this metallic combatant."

"We can't fight this thing!" Ramona exclaimed at Andrew. "And I can't use the advanced form of light in here! There's nothing in here I can use it for that would be able to pose any sort of significant help against Metal Mario – unless you think a dresser is going to do it any notable harm!"

Metal Mario leapt forward with a long bounce and dove at the light and shadow wielders, looking to land a punch on both of them. Ramona and Andrew jumped backwards and to the right, Metal Mario's fist instead slamming on the floor of the tower.

Ramona shook her head. "And unless it's a hollow entity, then any hit we make against it with our own bodies would be like hitting a metal vault; we'll do very little damage and end up mutilating ourselves instead! We need one of the matter-based elements here!"

"That would help," said Andrew. "But since we don't have one here, nor have we met up with the elemental wielders that we must purify

the shrines with, and since your telekinesis is rendered useless here, we'll just have to literally get rid of Metal Mario."

Ramona and Andrew slipped away as Metal Mario hopped into the air to spear kick the two fighters. Their evasion used up the last of the space between the wall behind them, meaning any move they made would have to be to the side or towards Metal Mario.

"But that could drain us of all our remaining energy!" Ramona whispered.

"Then we'll just have to time it right so that we don't drain all of our energy," Andrew said.

Metal Mario turned towards its targets. Ramona and Andrew once again locked themselves together and charged their elemental energy through their connected arms, but this time, they allowed the energy to meld together and fuse instead of just intertwine. What resulted was a large dimensional portal of their own that sprouted just as Metal Mario leapt at them to attack. The metallic clone of Mario landed inside the portal, and Ramona and Andrew cut off their flow of energy to the portal to disband it before they used up their last remaining reserves of energy.

"Interesting..." Elkon mumbled. "I didn't think you had enough energy left to be able to pull that off. Tell me; where exactly did you transport Metal Mario?"

"Who cares?" replied Andrew.

"Not here," Ramona said. "We didn't have enough time to try and designate a destination or route."

"You see," Elkon muttered in irritation. "This is why I am the only one who should be able to handle the dimensions. You're meddling with them and you don't even have the necessary control to handle them properly. Your kind has already ruined nature, but please, spare me the torture of watching you ruin space and reality."

Almost instantaneously, Ramona and Andrew were slammed back into the wall behind them. Elkon had his fist raised and out, but there

was no attack made of any sort. The two elemental wielders got back to their feet, completely astounded and horrified at the fact that they saw next to nothing hit them. Elkon stood there as if he was waiting for them to realize what had just happened.

"What was that?!" Ramona asked in terror. "What did he just do? I don't understand..."

"That's just great..." muttered Andrew. "Who... What...are we dealing with here?"

"Did he actually 'will' us into the wall?" Ramona asked with a tremble.

"No, he..." Andrew began. "He distorted the fabric of space itself."

"Really?" Ramona asked. "But that's a forbidden ability! Only a handful of beings in existence have ever been able to do that and they were born like that!"

"I saw the air in front of us ripple and warp," Andrew grimly said. "The space itself morphed and hit us. He used some kind of technique that manipulated the space into a long-range attack much like we're able to focus our light and shadow into projectiles."

"That's just insane," murmured Ramona. "For a mortal to have such abilities is undoubtedly *immoral* ..."

"No doubt about it, he's able to manipulate space," Andrew said in a very low tone. "Now I see how he has been so freely able to manipulate the dimensions."

"That's insane..." Ramona repeated. "That's just insane..."

"Do you see now that your efforts are as hopeless as they are meaningless and pointless?" Elkon called out.

"Andrew, we must make an escape now!" Ramona urged. "He's too much!"

"No, we're here now; we can do this!" Andrew asserted. "We can take him down and prevent him from doing any more damage to our

world!"

"We can't risk it anymore!" exclaimed Ramona. "If we don't escape now, we'll be killed and light and shadow will be eternally ruined! They may well be destroyed!"

"You're not going anywhere now that you know the whereabouts of my tower!" Elkon yelled, rushing forward with his Dimensional Saber still materialized. Ramona and Andrew split to opposite sides to avoid the slash. They then converged back towards each other and made a move for the center of the room.

"I don't need you inviting any company over here," Elkon growled. "So take solace in your surroundings, for they will be your grave."

"Please, Andrew!" Ramona begged. "Let us meet up with the other fighters and then return!" Elkon rushed towards Ramona to deal an upward slash. She parried and spun away on her back heel to set herself up to jump and perform a Helm Splitter attack on him, but he ducked, and the light wielder's blade caught nothing but air. Elkon countered with a backhanded swipe at Ramona, causing her to stumble backwards and roll along the ground in an effort to avoid a hit. Andrew leapt forward with a fully-powered fist of shadow energy aimed at Elkon's chest and knocked him clear to the other side of the room.

"Andrew, we can't stay here," Ramona said. "We're both almost out of energy and he's too much for us to handle! You told me we could bail if it got to this point!"

Elkon got back to his feet and dusted himself off. He raised a fist again, unleashing another harsh spatial wave that forced the two elemental wielders back into the wall.

"I have to give you credit, boy," said Elkon. "That actually hurt. Too much. Thanks for letting me know that you're a legitimate threat to my plans and for giving me more incentive to eliminate you from existence."

"Andrew..." urged Ramona.

"Damn it," Andrew muttered. "Alright, I guess we have no choice. With the remainder of my energy, I'll use advanced shadow for this." He began focusing shadow elementals while Ramona stepped forward to act as a guard. "I hate having to do this, but it seems we must accept defeat in this situation. After all, we're still needed for the Light Shrine and Shadow Shrine. Protect me, please."

Ramona smiled. "I will always protect you."

Elkon stalked towards Ramona and Andrew, Dimensional Saber in hand and vibrantly shining its pink and blue hue. *I only need to stall for just a minute* , Ramona thought. With the last bit of her energy, Ramona held up her rapier and shot out a golden laser, but Elkon put up what was supposed to be the fuller of his blade of energy to catch her attack. The light wielder kept letting the laser flow until she had exhausted her power, but unfortunately for her, the energy of her laser had collected onto Elkon's weapon due to the Dimensional Saber's special properties.

With the light energy now fully collected on his blade, Elkon slashed his sword, causing the mass of energy to rush back at Ramona. She made a swipe at the blast with her rapier to redirect it once again to Elkon. Once it was close enough, Elkon swung his saber and sent the light energy back to Ramona. She spun around to transfer more torque to her rapier and slammed her weapon into the incoming light energy to send it back to Elkon even faster than it had been traveling. Elkon made a quick diagonal slash with his weapon and the light energy to force it back at Ramona. The exchange went on for some time with Elkon and Ramona both swinging their blades to send the blast of light energy to the opposite party.

"Alright; enough!" Elkon grunted, aiming the incoming reflected light energy out one of the windows with his weapon. "If I wanted to play volleyball, I would be playing volleyball with an actual volleyball!"

Suddenly, Andrew burst forward with a claw made entirely of shadows. Despite having used up her remaining energy, Ramona kept close behind him with the blade of her rapier swallowed in light. Elkon dodged Andrew's swipe and punched the shadow wielder with his free hand, then leapt over the incoming light wielder. Andrew recovered quickly, already rushing towards Elkon to initiate another

swipe of his shadow claw. Unfortunately, Elkon picked up on this and turned around to thrust forward with his dimensional blade, bursting straight through Andrew's chest and impaling him.

"There," said Elkon. "You're finished; quoth the raven, nevermore." He pushed his dimensional blade deeper into his opponent and twisted the weapon around before pulling it out of the shadow wielder's body. However, something didn't seem quite right to him after a few moments had passed.

"Wait a minute," Elkon muttered. "Why haven't you fallen over?... Where's the girl?" The whole situation seemed erroneous and faulty already, but upon further inspection, Andrew's eyes didn't even have any pupils!

"What is this..." Elkon groaned with mounting frustration. Ramona could not be spotted. Soon, Andrew's body slowly faded away into darkness. Elkon looked around the room, his vision catching no other entity. He was the only being there, that is, until he saw what looked to be Ramona running along the side of the walls.

Elkon took off for Ramona and made a sweeping horizontal slash with his blade, dividing her body into top and bottom halves at her abdomen. No sound resulted from it. It was as if he cut through thin air rather than through a body! Then without notice or prior warning, Ramona's body as a whole disappeared into the darkness. Once again, Elkon found himself alone in the room. It was then that he realized what was going on. "The advanced form of shadow..." he said to himself. "Illusion... Tricky bastards."

Elkon paused and thought back to moments ago. *Just before the girl had fired her blast, I noticed the boy stand down as if he was intensely focusing on something* , he said in his mind. *That meant that at some point after the girl fired her laser, some sort of illusion technique was implemented. So while I was dealing with illusions, they were able to make their way back down the stairs and out of the tower without me realizing it. In the illusion, I killed them both, but in reality, I killed neither one.* "They're alive and they have fled my dwelling," he then said aloud. " *That* , just won't do. One does not simply trespass on and in my territory without repercussions."

He walked to one of the windows, trying unsuccessfully to spot the two elemental wielders. He went and looked out another window and saw light being emitted in the distance from the portal that was the gateway to the Stone Shrine, but there would have been no reason for them to go there at this point. Off in a different direction but just a little further away was the portal that led to an area just south of the Light Shrine and Shadow Shrine.

They've almost assuredly fled too far away to pursue , Elkon thought, replacing his hood over his head as he walked to the center of the room. With his Dimensional Saber, he cut out five dimensional rifts, each one in a row in front of him and eight feet in length. They expanded into elliptical portals to allow a sizable being passage through each. In a matter of moments, several figures emerged from the portals.

"Those two somehow figured out where my sanctuary is..." Elkon cooed with a hint of outrage. He checked his pockets to make sure his special gem was still on his person. "At least I still have this legendary artifact in my possession. But that was still *too* close. If they had knocked it free from me and saw it... No, I'll have to *reinforce* this tower to make sure that trespassers are dealt with accordingly. You people want to try and infiltrate my structure? Fine, so be it. But after today, no one is going to be able to just walk in here like that again without facing serious consequences."

Chapter XVIII

Memory Forest :

The Moirai, now six in number, had set off for the remote Air Shrine, departing Delight City early the morning after confronting the Mafio Brothers and the Vodyanoy. It was close to noon when Bowser had parked the Offroader at the entrance of a great bushland known as Memory Forest. They had only gone a short distance in when the Koopa King became skeptical of their surroundings.

"Lemme see those notes you have of your hometown records again," Bowser asked Athelstan. "This place doesn't look the way I envisioned it would."

"Sure," the brown-clothed fighter replied. He reached into his pocket for his notepad and handed it to Bowser. "It's just as I had said on our way here; according to my notes, the Air Shrine is going to be straight ahead through this wide passage under the tree cover and then across a lake clearing and up a cliff, then further back into the deeper parts of the forest. You can't beat information straight outta Kallantown."

"Kallantown," Warra asked. "That's the city to the west of where the Stone Shrine was correct? I believe that was the first time you mentioned its name in conversation."

"Well, nobody asked!" Athelstan replied. "Did you know that the woman who invented the Bullet Bill came from there? The architect for the great Quintuplet Towers in the city of Aria came from Kallantown as well!"

"Wow, that actually is pretty significant!" said Warra.

"Yup," said Athelstan. "It also has one of the biggest populations of scholars, historians, and archaeologists in the continent! That's why I'm certain that the information I've gathered on the locations of these shrines is accurate. The Kallantown Archives are the best archives around, bar none!"

Bowser handed Athelstan the notes back. "Yeah, I didn't think there would be anyway we could get that truck up a cliff or even across that large lake without seriously damaging it. But even so, this place looks pretty suspect."

"Spoiler alert; Bowser's skeptical about everything," said Daisy.

"Maybe it's because of these abnormally large trees and dense leaf cover," Marut suggested.

"Yeah," said Daisy. "This place is about three or four times the size and height of your typical run-of-the-mill forest you'd see anywhere else."

"I wonder why they call it 'Memory Forest?' " Marut asked. "It's so colorful, it should be called 'Color Forest!' "

"Crayon Forest," Athelstan added.

"Nah, Oil Pastel Forest," Daisy said.

"Too Damn Bright Forest," Bowser muttered. "It's like a greener version of Maple Treeway! Isn't it like, October right now, or something? Shouldn't more of these leaves be reddening and falling off?"

"Maybe these aren't real trees," Daisy said, sarcasm evident.

"Oh, right; the people here couldn't afford real trees," said Bowser.

"Nope!" Athelstan replied. "They're all bootlegs." Grekka suppressed a giggle and shook his head.

"Planted with bootleg seeds," added Marut.

"Bootleg trees from bootleg seeds," said Bowser. "Mission accomplished. Let's all go home."

"This forest is way too pretty to be fake," said Daisy. "And, c'mon guys; bootleg trees? Somebody explain that!"

"So how sure are you of the accuracy and scope of the Kallantown

Archives?" Warra asked Athelstan, changing the subject.

"Beyond sure," replied Athelstan. "Every piece of information in there is at the very minimum ninety percent accurate, and that's the low end of extremes. I worked there on and off as a chronicler and archivist for a little while. The amount of information kept in that vast complex is beyond substantial and under high security, to the point where they can't afford to have any false, misleading, biased, or otherwise flawed information. Although they do have a separate section for incomplete and inconclusive records that periodically go through review for admission into the main archives, pieces in that section are always liable to be dismissed from the building altogether. No kidding! They take everything there very seriously. They actually had a saying back there along the lines of, 'If you don't know what's behind a door, you have no business going back there.' "

"Impressive," said Warra.

"The best," Athelstan assured. "Kallantown Archives – can't beat 'em."

"His coconut gun, can fire in spurts-" Marut shouted.

"Now what are you doing?" asked Bowser.

"Singin'," Marut replied. "If he shoots ya – it's gonna hurt!"

"You're singing at a time like this?!" Bowser said with disbelief. "Is this a child that we have on our team here?"

"Ah, loosen your neck tie, big guy!" Marut rhymed.

Bowser's eyes grew wide. "Are you real?!"

"I'm taking this mission just as serious, if not more serious, than you are Bowser," said Daisy. "But I can appreciate the attitude that Marut is maintaining in this atmosphere. We can relax and not be so uptight about things while still keeping focus on our goals."

"Don't worry! I'm definally not taking our mission with a grain of salt," Marut assured.

"I'll tell you again – Definitely!" Bowser exclaimed.

"You'll tell me what again?" asked Marut, still oblivious to the correction.

Bowser could only facepalm himself. Everyone in the group laughed, including Grekka, who had been fairly silent since they had left Delight City. Daisy looked back at the ice wielder and saw his big eyes aimed at the ground. He didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular but the feet around him to make sure he knew where he was going. "You don't talk very much, do you?" she asked the Moirai of Ice.

Grekka tilted his head up just a tad and answered, "Not really much at all. Forgive me, but I just don't have much to say a vast majority of the time."

"So where you from, bro?" Marut asked.

"I'm from a town near the Ice Shrine," said Grekka. "I actually attempted to try and take care of the guardian of that shrine while I was there so that you all could arrive without having to battle for access to the Ice Gemstone, but it was too much for me to handle..."

"Too much to handle?" Warra asked. "You handled Vodyanoy like he was nothing! Are you trying to say that the guardian of the Ice Shrine is that powerful?"

"Yes," Grekka replied. "And one of the most sinister beings that currently exist in this world."

"Wow, what has he done?" Daisy asked.

"I'd rather not say until we get there..." Grekka responded. "It's a pretty grave situation."

"That's quite alright," said Daisy. "We've got the Air Shrine ahead that we still need to take care of, so we can worry about the Ice Shrine afterwards." She then gave a reassuring smile to the Moirai of Ice, who blushed with a nervous and puzzled expression.

"Guys," said Marut. "Why are there windows in some of these tree

trunks?"

"What are you talking about?" Bowser asked, turning his head to look around. "Hey! Why are there lampposts out here?!" Two-thirds of the numerous trees had groups of old world windows in rows along the bottom halves of their thick and wide trunks. Lampposts were spread out alongside the passage they had been trekking, a passage that now seemed to have been manually cleared and cultivated at some point in the past.

"Athelstan!" Bowser barked. "Archives! Notes! Explain! Nonsense!"

"Well," Athelstan began to say while flipping through his notepad. "This is a very old region. From what the people in Kallantown had gathered, this place has been around since the beginning of time. I didn't bother with recording the details."

"Is that why it's called 'Memory Forest,' then?" Daisy asked.

"That's one possibility," said Athelstan. "But the answer to that question would've been placed in the pile for sorting and review. Even the best of archives don't contain all the information in the world. That's just impossible; we as a planet barely know anything about the universe altogether as it stands now."

"Perhaps there used to be a civilization here?" Warra asked. "And now they've abandoned this place? There's not a single sentient being around here, unless they're all really good at hiding and being silent."

"I wonder what this place would be like at nighttime," Daisy thought aloud. She imagined the forest at night with all the lampposts on and all the lights in the trees lit and shining out the windows. *Maybe civilization could come back here,* she said in her mind.

"Let's just keep walking," said Bowser. "I don't think whether people used to be here or not should have any relevancy to or any bearing on where we're going."

"It shouldn't," Athelstan said. "The geography for the most part corroborates with what I have written down, and that's all that

matters to get where we're going. It'll be interesting to see though if it has any impact on our routes or destination."

Suddenly, Daisy collapsed to the ground without notice. Everyone looked back to see what happened and why she fell, surprised because no one sensed anything or anyone nearby besides each other.

"What happened, Daisy?" Warra asked.

"There's a whole row of Lantanas here!" Daisy shouted with glowing eyes. She sat there glaring at the line of vibrant yellow and hot pink flowers growing on top of a small bush.

"Oh," Warra said with a sigh. "That's all."

"Stop with the flowers, damn it!" Bowser griped. Daisy narrowed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him.

"Hey! These look pretty sweet," Marut said, plopping down next to Daisy to admire the plants. Grekka went over to stand and view the flowers too, a pleasant and content little grin curving his mouth.

"Wonderful," Bowser dryly said. "I suppose next you're all gonna wanna stop and camp out for the night when it's only noon."

"You know, I could do with sitting around a campfire, drinkin' some nice cold ones," Athelstan thought aloud. "Yep, a beverage right about now sounds nice."

"Great!" exclaimed Bowser. "While we're at it, let's all hold hands around the campfire and sing 'Kumbaya!' "

"Workaholic much?" the Moirai of Stone jokingly replied.

"We all have something we need to be doing right about now," Warra subtly reminded the group.

"Right, sorry," Daisy said, her and Marut getting back to their feet.

The group continued on, going deeper into the forest and along the passage. The presence of the forest itself seemed to change as they

went further, its ambience resonating throughout the group.

"This forest...makes me think..." Daisy said as they continued walking. "It's strange, but, I feel like I've been here before even though I know I've never even come close to this place..."

Bowser turned his head and looked at the elongated and surreal height of the trees. They had to have extended at least a fifth of a mile into the air, displacing the Sun's rays all around. He stopped walking and turned to a somewhat large and rectangular lone opening in the tree top covers that was all by itself and away from all the other holes in the overhead leaf sheet. The opening invoked something within the Koopa King that he had unknowingly repressed.

That sun ray, Bowser thought. *To be shining down into this forest here in that manner... It looks so familiar...and yet I don't quite know why... Oh, that's right... I think I remember now...*

The King of Koopas was getting infuriated. "I don't know how many times...we have to do this, but I'll keep doing this until you tell me why!"

Bowser and Princess Peach had been in the interrogation room on the third floor of his castle for nearly a half hour. Peach was sitting in a chair, the Koopa King inconsistently pacing back and forth in front of her. The setting sun was casting its golden rays through the lone bay window on their right into the dark gray room. The door was locked, koopa troopas were guarding and on standby out in the halls, and once again, they were going through the exact same scenario they had been going through ever since the invasion of the Koopa Clan by the Toadstool family; Bowser had captured the princess and demanded that the information he wanted be given to him. And once again, it was turning out the same way it always had.

"Just tell me!" Bowser ordered.

Peach did nothing but look at the koopa with a blank expression on her face.

"Why did you attack us?"

There was no answer.

"Why did you take our land from us?"

Still no answer.

"Why did you slaughter all those koopas?... Why did you ravage our home?... Why?"

Not a single response was given.

"What happened to my parents?"

Peach and Bowser locked eyes. No sadness. No madness. No happiness. No fearfulness. Nothing. The princess showed nothing.

"Why can't you ever tell me?!" Bowser asked, voice cracking.

Peach bowed her head to conceal her eyes within the shadow of her hair. Nothing.

"We didn't do a damn thing to you people!" Bowser roared. "So...WHY?!"

Peach remained motionless, keeping her eyes shadowed. No response.

"You can't even say you're sorry..." Bowser mumbled, turning his back to the princess. "You can't even apologize... You never can, can you... You never could..."

Peach gave no answer. She did not so much as flinch. Aside from her breathing, it was as if she was playing dead.

"No, this is the last time..." Bowser muttered to himself. His tone grew dark and subdued, set to remain that way for the remainder of the time spent inside the interrogation room. Bowser walked to the corner of the chamber and picked up a sheath with a two-handed sword inside.

"This must be put to an end..." he murmured as he walked back to Peach. As he stood in front of the princess, he unsheathed the weighted blade in all its glory. Peach stared at the king with the same expression she had the whole time she was there and every time before.

"This blade is known as the 'Koopa's Spirit,' " Bowser told Peach. "This was the prized and cherished blade of my mother, handed down through generations of rulers. I was supposed to inherit it when the day came that the koopa monarchy would be handed over to me. It came too soon."

Peach remained motionless and silent.

"It was said to be indestructible, and therefore was the symbol of the undying health and well-being of our clan...but that meaning has no bearing on reality any longer." Bowser choked on his words trying to finish his statement.

The princess then raised her head back up, relocking eye contact with Bowser. The two shared a deep, intense stare for several moments; no words spoken, no verbiage needed.

"This must be settled now," Bowser finally said. "I, the dejected heir to the koopa throne, stand before you with neither national, nor personal sovereignty." He took the sword by its long hilt and handed it to Peach. "Finish what you started. I've locked the door so no one can get in until you've completed the deed."

Peach stood up from the chair with the Koopa's Spirit in hand. Bowser put his arms behind his shell and knelt down.

"This is the moment I know you've been waiting for," Bowser said under his breath, closing his eyes. "Here's your chance. Take advantage of it..."

Peach stood there for a while with the hefty sword in her hands, staring at the koopa before her who was submitting himself and his life to her. She bowed her head, once again concealing her eyes in shadows, once again without a single hint of emotion. She raised the sword up into the air.

A loud clang was heard outside of the interrogation room.

"What was that?" one of the koopas asked.

"I don't know," another answered. "But we were told to guard the room, not interfere with what's going on inside."

Back inside the room, the Koopa's Spirit was lying on the ground near a corner of the room. Peach had tossed it aside, non-verbally refusing to follow through with the opportunity Bowser gave her. Bowser opened his eyes halfway in disappointment.

The Koopa King spoke in a murmur more powerful than any roar or yell. "Not finishing what you started...is just as dishonorable as the actions you and your kingdom have committed against my people."

Peach did not have a response to the statement, much like she had throughout her time in the room. Bowser stood up and turned his back to the princess once more.

"You're free to go..." Bowser croaked. "I don't even want to keep you around here anymore..."

Peach still did not utter a word, but stood there for a little while as if contemplating whether or not to go before slowly turning move towards the door. She undid the lock and walked out the room. A couple of the koopa troopa guards looked into the room, confused.

"What's going on, great king?" asked one of the guards. "What happened?"

"Just get her out of here," Bowser quietly ordered. "She doesn't need to be here."

The sunset outside the castle looked red and orange, casting a shadow over the entrance of Bowser's castle. As Peach was escorted outside, silent tears of remorse rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, King..." she mumbled. "I did it for my kingdom. It went too far – it was out of control, I know. I'm sorry... There's no consolation I can give that can make up for it..." These were the only words she had ever spoken to Bowser, and she didn't even say them directly to

him.

Bowser went up to the fourth floor of the castle and into the throne room. It was the same throne room where Peach and her forces overran his parents and the koopa defense years ago. The damage was repaired, but the scars were made and had long since matured into the eternal marks they would be known as among all koopas.

"We need to destroy this place," Bowser muttered to the guards in the room, voice cracking throughout his words. "This place brings back too many memories. It's too depressing."

"Are you sure, king?" one of the koopas asked.

Bowser nodded his head and responded with a quiet, "Yeah."

"Then what'll we do, sir?" a second koopa asked.

Bowser turned to the window and stared out into the setting sun with all its vibrant hues. He didn't respond at first, but then answered, "We'll build a palace." He paused, watching a jet fly by in the darker areas of the sky, no doubt off to somewhere important. "It'll be a grand and magnificent place. A place where we can try to move on. As for the Mushroom Kingdom, I just...don't know what to do about them anymore... I don't..." He continued to gaze at the sunset and the surrounding sky that dimmed with each passing second. The thoughts in his mind were so numerous that they were occluding his sense of reality.

Bowser! Hey Bowser!

Bowser gasped at the voice he heard echoing in his mind.

Bowser! C'mon!

"Bowser! C'mon!" Daisy shouted from up the path. "You accuse me of stalling for flowers but you're standing there and staring at trees now?"

"Yeah, look who's trying to take a break now!" Athelstan hollered

from further up front.

Bowser looked at his teammates, still trying to come out of his stupor. *That's right* , he thought to himself. *It was just a memory...a memory that felt so real...* He rushed up to quickly rejoin his teammates and continue on their way in the direction of the Air Shrine.

This mission, these guys , Bowser thought as they marched along. *They've all been distracting me from my own mission, from my goal of reviving the Koopa Clan. It's strange how much of an impact these guys have had so far, but to be honest, much of my anger has started to settle in the time that I've spent with these people. They've all been so nice, they've treated me like a true teammate, they've treated me like a...friend...despite my monstrous form, depite me being so different from them. The Toadstool family didn't hesitate to dismiss us as monsters that were in the way of economic and political prosperity, yet these people here, Athelstan, Warra, Daisy, Marut, Grekka...they've all treated me like I was one of their own. What does this mean? Are these my...my friends?*

"Daisy," Bowser said, motioning her to the back of the group.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"At the Earth Shrine, when you said that you would help restore the koopas to their former glory," Bowser began. "Did you really mean that, or was it just a heat of the moment type of thing?"

"I say what I mean and I mean what I say," Daisy replied. "I don't know how I'll be able to do it, but I if I say I'm gonna do it, then that means I'm gonna do it."

Bowser made a surprised look. "Are you sure? How do you know you can do it? I don't think you need to worry about it. It's fine. It's my responsibility, and as Koopa King I-"

"We'll find a way," Daisy softly assured. There was no mistaking the serious sincerity in her tone and face. She meant it.

As they continued their trek to find the Air Shrine, Bowser kept

thinking to himself about all that plagued his mind, but he was able to come to terms with one thing. Daisy's statement had made him certain that there was one thing he knew he could believe despite the troubles that his koopas had experienced.

That's all the confirmation I need now, he concluded in his mind. *You're wrong Elkon. Not every human is bad.*

Chapter XIX

From the Lake to the Clouds :

Another twenty minutes of walking brought the Moirai to an expansive clearing and a ledge stretching across a rectangular lake. The body of water appeared to span well over a mile before stopping at a tall cliff face that looked to be on a high level of ground off in the distance.

"That's where we need to go," said Athelstan. "Up on top of that cliff all the way over there."

"But we're at a dead end," stated Warra. "There's no way for us to get across there, and we'd need at least two water wielders to be able to manipulate a lake of this magnitude. We can't go around the lake to the left or the right because the forest is too densely packed on either side."

"Hey, do you guys see that symbol on the ground just before the end of ledge?" Daisy asked. She pointed to a faintly visible decoration engraved in the grass and dirt behind three thick prisms of stone. The symbol was also surrounded by a handful of miscellaneous stone pillars of varying degrees of tilt. The Moirai all gathered around the symbol and stone pieces to try and make out what they were.

"What do you guys make of it?" asked Daisy.

"Haven't a clue," Bowser replied.

"Isn't that the air symbol on the ground?" Athelstan asked, turning to look at Marut's sleeves to compare the two emblems.

"It is!" Marut said. "What does that mean?"

Athelstan shrugged with a puzzled expression. "Hey, I don't know; you're the air guy here! I thought you knew this stuff!"

Suddenly, the ground underneath all six of the fighters began to shake tremor. The chunk of area they were standing on lifted up and slowly hovered into the air.

"Daisy? Athelstan? What are you doing?" Bowser asked.

"I'm not doing anything," said Daisy.

"Me neither!" Athelstan added.

After rising twenty feet into the air, the mass of land stopped its ascent and levitated above the ground. The three pieces of stone that were laying out in front of the symbol glowed and miraculously rose up into the air in a vertical, triangular pattern.

"That's strange," Bowser muttered. "This entire platform resembles that Battlefield arena in the Super Smash Brothers Tournament from a couple years back, though this dark green vegetation and these walkways tinted dark blue with air markings don't have anything to do with that event..."

"What does that mean?" Daisy asked. "I'm not sure exactly what you're talking about; I wasn't admitted into that Smash Tournament...or any of them actually..."

"This platform has been around for a while," said Warra. "Some of these markings are strikingly similar to the ones we found in the Stone Shrine."

The mass of land shifted again, slowly floating out over the lake. In a matter of moments, the large platform made a brisk beeline for the cliff face off in the distance.

"How is this thing even moving?" Marut asked.

"Ask Mario when you get a chance," said Bowser. "He's the one that always deals with this moving platform crap!"

"Who cares! At least it looks like we're heading where we need to be going!" exclaimed Daisy.

"We'll probably be over to the other side in about three minutes at

this rate," said Warra.

The large platform steadily made its way across the lake with modest speed, but the trip would not be peaceful. A legion of sizable flying squirrels gathered out of the trees from behind the platform and swooped down from the sky in kamikaze-like fashion. All six fighters had to dodge and evade the numerous incoming creatures as they practically dive-bombed from above.

"When did these guys get pissed off?!" Athelstan asked while avoiding the attacking flying squirrels. "We didn't do anything to them!"

"Better question; how are there so many?" Daisy asked while swiftly avoiding a group of the airborne animals. Marut leapt to the forefront and manipulated the air to create strong gusts that blocked against any further attacks from the flying squirrels and sent them backwards, bringing an end to the short bout of attacks from the animals. The creatures all turned around and headed back to the trees on their side of the lake.

"Man, what was that all about?" Athlelstan wondered aloud.

"What if the activation of this platform disturbed them?" Warra asked.

"Why would they be disturbed?" Marut asked. "As long as this thing has been here?"

Daisy shook her head. "They'd be disturbed if this was the first time this platform has been uncovered in ages; they'd be disturbed if they've never seen it before in their lives because the last time anyone came through these parts and activated this platform was when their ancestors from however many years ago were alive. That's just further proof of how abandoned this place is; There must not have been anyone around here for quite a lengthy stretch of time."

The platform continued its way along the lake and began to elevate further up into the air so that it would be able to clear above the upcoming tall cliff face. As they approached the other side of the

lake, they noticed that a wind had developed and picked up rather quickly. After another half minute, the platform made it to the cliff and moved up and over the clifftop. At that moment, the large mass stopped its travel and lowered itself to a rest on the ground. The Moirai leapt off of the platform and onto the clearing that narrowed into a passageway through a deeper section of the forest. There was a long and wide trench that the mass of land had come to rest in much like it had on the other side of the lake. The three smaller platforms returned to the ground as well, and the elemental wielders started down the passage.

The tone of this area of the great forest seemed much more secluded and secretive. The sun was not shining as easily onto the forest floor as it was back on the other side of the lake, making the lighting of most of the surroundings resemble a room with dark curtains pulled over the windows. The winds generated randomized shear, beginning to gust with more intensity as opposed to earlier. The air could be heard pummeling the outlandishly thick and wide tree trunks of the forest.

"Man, this wind is starting to get a little outta hand!" Marut exclaimed.

"If it keeps increasing, then this forest might end up getting flattened," said Athelstan.

"It must be from the corruption of the air element," said Warra. "Remember that the corruption radiates outwards from the shrine so that as time passes, more and more of the area around the shrine is affected until the effects exceed the area and spread across the world."

"That means we must be getting close," said Daisy. "So let's keep moving. We're essentially on a time limit."

Further trekking deeper into the area brought them to a large building that strangely looked as old as it did new. Its build was classical, but there were no signs of any aging whatsoever other than the its partial occlusion from the overgrowth and plant life of the forest. None of the Moirai even wanted to attempt to try and explain the appearance of the building and why it seemed to be ignored by

time. At this point, few holes were available for rays to shine through the sheet of leaves overhead, and the wind caused the rays to constantly shift and move. A long stair climb lead to the entrance of the great structure with boulders offset along each side of the stairs.

"Not what I was expecting for a shrine of the air element," Warra commented.

"You're telling me," Marut murmured.

"Well, c'mon then," said Daisy, heading up the stairs. "We won't accomplish anything critiquing the architecture." The other five Moirai followed and ascended the stairs. Once they got up to the top, Daisy and Grekka pushed open the double doors, revealing the building's interior. All six of them walked in, but were thoroughly disappointed and confused with what they saw.

"This isn't the Air Shrine..." said Warra. "It's a library!"

"That's weird..." Athelstan muttered. "The Air Shrine is supposed to be somewhere around this area, but I didn't even come across anything in the Kallantown Archives that so much as mentioned a library..."

"So was that information in the sort and review section?" Bowser asked.

"I couldn't begin to say," Athelstan mumbled in amazement. "I would hope it at least *made it* to that section."

"This can't be right," Daisy said under her breath, puzzled.

"Should we check it out?" Athelstan suggested. "It's a library, so it's gotta have something we could use to direct us to the Air Shrine."

"It's a large library at that," added Grekka, who had been largely silent since they entered the forest. "The collection here is far more extensive than any that I have seen."

"But why is a library out here in an abandoned region?" Warra asked with a hint of urgency. "And why are all the library's archives still in here as well? The shelves are all filled with books and documents!"

"A civilization must have been here at one time in the past," said Bowser. "That's the only thing that makes sense now. But as far as why they left behind their books, I don't have a clue."

"Hello? Who's there?" a voice called out.

"Down in front!" replied Daisy.

"Daisy!" Warra whispered. "Why did you tell it where we are? What if it's an enemy?!"

"Oh well," the Moirai of Earth said with a careless smile.

"Oh well, she says," Warra muttered. His caution proved unnecessary in this instance, for an elderly toad with a brown head, purple button vest, white pants, and mustache and glasses walked out from one of the many aisles of books to meet with the elemental wielders.

"Toadsworth?!" Daisy asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah yes," said Toadsworth. "Good to see you madame, and King Koopa, I see you're healthy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bowser asked.

"Oh let's not start a quarrel out here, old sport," said Toadsworth.

"I have nothing to say to you or your people for what your kingdom has done," Bowser grumbled in distaste.

Toadsworth nodded. "Rest assured, regarding the happenings of back then, that I had no role in whatever operations the Mushroom Kingdom carried out. In fact, a lot of the population that wasn't in the military was for the most part kept in the dark. You know how propaganda works, don't you, old sport?"

"I do, and I am still as mad as ever about how wrongly it was used," Bowser coldly remarked.

"Understood, Bowser," Toadsworth said. "Far be it from me to try and play mediator. I'm quite frankly in no position to. I won't try to

say that I can empathize with you, but I can say that if I had a say in the way things went down back then, I would've been sure that a lot of those events either transpired differently or not at all. I suppose it's little consolation for me to say now. I apologize for the trials and tribulations the Mushroom Kingdom has put you through, dear boy."

"Can I put you on a pizza and eat you?" Marut asked in astonishment.

"Good heavens! Cannibals!" Toadsworth exclaimed, stepping backwards.

"Marut! This is a person!" said Daisy. "Haven't you ever seen a Toad before?"

"If you mean frogs, then yes," said Marut. "If you mean talking mushrooms, then no."

"So anyways, what brought you out here, Toadsworth?" Daisy asked. "Don't mind Marut." The air wielder blinked his eyes in innocent and slightly confused ignorance.

"Right, well, I was out on an expedition to this great and abandoned library," Toadsworth began. "Granted, the winds in this area of the region were quite unfriendly, but I pressed on! One of my goals was to travel to the fabled Memory Forest Library said to have been lost in time – even though people have been reported to have seen something quite...strange, and beyond our modern technology in this area – so that I may be able to access its extensive database. But regardless, this place is said to have literature and records that were around since the Era of the World's Creation, and even managed to endure through the Era of Chaos! In the few hours that I have been here, I have been able to confirm that the records in this place are quite exhaustive! For example, have you heard the legend of the noble Culex? He is a dark knight that is said to have been able to use all eight elements at once! He would travel through the world and across dimensions to challenge the worthiest opponents he could find! A remarkable being he was; the epitome of honor! It's records like those and even more that are all over this vast complex!"

"Culex, huh?" Daisy asked, very much intrigued with the potential prospect.

Warra gasped in anticipation of what the Moirai of Earth was thinking. "Really Daisy? You're just a brawler aren't you?! Do you expect to go around and challenge every warrior and fighter you come across?"

"You bet!" she happily replied.

Warra let out a heavy sigh."For your sake, I hope you have the most reliable health insurance on this planet," he muttered.

"There are several many records, legends, historical documents and the like all within these vast archives!" Toadsworth continued. "In particular, one of the things I'm hoping to find here is information on the Legend of the Shadow People of Hell Valley! Unfortunately for me, I have yet to come across even a single document regarding it!"

"The Shadow People of Hell Valley..." Daisy repeated. "That's right, that one's very interesting. You'll have to share your findings on that one with us if you happen to come across any sort of information that pertains to it in any way. That one is truly an anomaly."

"So how impressive are those Kallantown Archives compared to this library here?" Bowser asked Athelstan as the two looked around through the rows and rows of books.

"It's truly a close call; I can't tell," the Moirai of Stone replied. "But if I was a betting man – and I'm not...for a reason – I'd have to say that this place beats out the Kallantown Archives just because of the fact that this place has been around much longer. I mean, our archives don't even have any information that this library exists – so that's saying something!"

"Hey, how likely is it that this place has any information on Elkon?" Warra asked the group.

"Elkon, huh?" Toadsworth muttered while fiddling with his mustache. "Sounds powerful."

"Immensely," Daisy broodingly responded. "Long story short, we

have to stop this guy. But before we can do that, we need to look for and cleanse four shrines, which is why we're here right now; so that we can cleanse the Air Shrine."

"Interesting," Toadsworth replied. "Unfortunately, I can't help you there. However, I would have to guess that a place like this would have at least some sort of file of Elkon!"

Rosalina appeared before them at that moment, deciding to do so as her actual self rather than through an astral clone projection this time. "We've tried that already," she said. "And we were unable to find anything on Elkon. It could be that he may be too recent of a being to have been on file long enough to have records stored here in the library, but we have a decent amount of information on Marut, and he's the youngest one here at eighteen years of age."

"And Elkon has to be at least fifteen years older than Marut," Athelstan said. "So if there are no records of him, then there are no records of him; that simple."

"That doesn't explain why there aren't any," said Warra. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but everyone is supposed to have an adequate amount of information about them stored in a permanent record."

"And Elkon does," Rosalina affirmed. "But since he was recorded as dead, no records were kept on him since."

"But he's clearly not dead," said Bowser.

"Look, we'll have to figure it out later," said Daisy. "We should get to the Air Shrine before the winds start to intensify to the point where this forest is put in danger."

"Guys, I think this is the Air Shrine!" Marut exclaimed.

"That's correct, Marut," Rosalina confirmed.

"What do you mean this is the Air Shrine?" Bowser asked. "Are you sure? How do you know?"

"Well, I was just guessing!" Marut replied. "If you look around at the air markings high on the walls and the air symbol on parts of the

ceiling, I'd hope you'd guess the same thing!"

"Come to think of it," Toadsworth said as he looked at the air symbol on the ceiling. "Towards the back of the library and near the middle is an elevator with a large and embroidered version of that symbol on top of the doorway frame. The only buttons it had were an up and a down button. Granted, I don't know what's up there because it's locked."

"The gemstone room must be just up that elevator then!" said Daisy.

"Well, this has to be the easiest shrine we've had to progress through out of them all," said Warra.

"Well good," Bowser muttered. "That makes up for the labyrinth being that damned forest out there. If we had to go through that confusing forest and *then* on top of that have to go through another dungeon for the shrine, I would've been quite livid."

"I suggest you make your way to the elevator now," said Rosalina. "You have time, but funnels are starting to form high up in the stratosphere. Also, I'm sensing something of substantial power overhead. Use extreme caution." At the end of her statement, she teleported out of the library, most likely heading back to the Comet Observatory.

"Alright, you heard her," said Daisy. "Let's go."

"Good luck on your quest!" said Toadsworth as the Moirai made their way to the back of the library. "Don't worry about trying to look for me on the way out – I'll be buried deep in the library's records! I'll probably be here for a day or two before I return to the Mushroom Kingdom!"

Near the very back of the library, the elevator awaited, the air symbol hanging over its entrance. The elevator shaft was made almost entirely of a thick and sturdy see-through glass. Though an iron gate cut off entry into the elevator, there was a chute to the side of it that could be seen ascending through the glass walls and opening up directly to a lever.

"That lever must open the gate," said Grekka.

"That's on you, Marut," said Warra.

"Right," said Marut. He shot a small gust of high-speed air through the chute that packed enough force to push the lever. The activation of the lever allowed the gate to split apart and give way to the elevator.

The wide and spacious elevator had the capacity for about two dozen people, and would've been better served being described as a rising platform. A few pillars on each corner of the platform held up the ceiling of the open elevator frame, though the frame itself was made of a combination of stone and metal. The six fighters pressed the up button on the side and walked into the large shaft. They began a smooth ascent upwards, though were surprised when the elevator did not stop climbing after traveling up dozens of feet. Through the glass walls, they saw that they had cleared through the roof of the library and were elevating up along the abnormally tall trees of the forest at a steady pace.

"This is a really tall elevator!" Warra commented in astonishment.

"It's the great glass elevator!" Marut cheered.

"Oh boy, a chocolate factory must be waiting for us up there," said Bowser.

"When Rosalina said 'overhead,' how far overhead did she mean?" asked Athelstan.

"Forget that!" exclaimed Bowser. "I'm trying to figure out what an elevator's doing in an ancient shrine in the first place!"

"I wouldn't try to think about it too much," said Daisy. "With what we've seen on the journey so far, anything's game." Grekka added nothing, but nodded in agreement with the Moirai of Earth.

The elevator kept ascending higher and higher, soon even clearing the giant trees. When the Moirai looked up around the edges of the roof of the elevator frame, they saw that they still had a considerable amount of climb left.

"How did we not see this from the outside?" asked Bowser.

"Remember," said Warra. "Those were extremely tall trees that were around this building, almost to the point of exaggeration. Not only that, but there was significant tree top cover overhead. We would've probably needed the perfect vantage point from a far away enough place to even notice, and we'd probably be too far to make out the long shaft going this far up into the sky! Not to mention that this shaft is made of some really thick glass!"

"How is this elevator this tall and still standing?" Athelstan wondered aloud.

"It has been able to withstand weather and time to remain whole," Grekka said.

"We may have to get pulled up another mile into the air before we even get out!" exclaimed Marut.

"So whatever is at the top here could easily be mistaken for an aircraft, couldn't it?" asked Athelstan. "I mean, to escape detection given everything that we now know and are now witnessing and experiencing? How crazy is that?"

"The technology it must've taken to be able to make an elevator of this magnitude..." Bowser mumbled.

"But this place is so ancient! How is that possible?" Marut asked.

"Exactly," said Warra. "What if because this is such a large library and because of the books and records contained here, the Great Beings – or even those at the Comet Observatory – revisit this place periodically for renovation and upkeep?"

"That seems to be the most plausible explanation," the Koopa King said. "This place is abandoned...so nobody would be here except for them and the occasional passerby, like Toadsworth..."

"And us," added Athelstan, turning to look at the Moirai of Earth. "Are you holding up alright, Daisy?"

Daisy was still very weak from battling Vodyanoy and was now

starting to look noticeably fatigued, but she still maintained the confident and steely poise she had kept throughout the quest. "Yeah...just the altitude... I'm so not used to this altitude at all..." Her reply came with heavy breath as sweat beaded along her forehead. "I'll be fine..."

Warra sighed, a worried look plastered on his face. *I'd hope so, Daisy* , he thought. *You didn't have much time to recover from the fight against the Vodyanoy, and now you're in a high altitude environment.*

It's just as I thought in the beginning, Bowser thought. *Earth wielders falter the higher they are off the ground, and since she was beaten roundly by that water demon and hasn't even made any significant recovery from it, she's now starting to struggle to even remain conscious. If she didn't have the will that she has, she would've long since passed out by now. We need to make sure she's the furthest one from the danger that lies ahead in wait.*

Warra's healing water is good, Daisy thought. *It's not as potent as Mushrooms, but I'm grateful that we have it around.* She looked down to and saw that they were now so high up in the air that their sight of the ground blurred and became hazy. Not until after they cleared the lower lying clouds did the elevator start slowing its pace.

Through the glass shaft, the Moirai saw that they were now entering a vertical tunnel of brick and stone. A few hundred more yards up and the elevator slowed to a complete stop in front of a large door. The door split open down the middle and opened up to allow the six elemental wielders to pass through.

Chapter XX

The Trembling Heavens :

The elevator opened into a grand and regal room with a vestibule of stone, tile, and concrete that had two large double doors opposite where the Moirai entered. There were stairs on either side of the doors that led up to a higher level in the room but didn't appear to lead to any other area and only served as a perimeter above the main floor.

"I don't think we need to worry about the stairs," said Warra. "Those two doors have to be where we need to go through."

"How is this place stable in the air?!" asked Bowser.

"And perfectly level!" added Athelstan. "It's amazing how badly ancient technology is beating modern tech right now, especially considering that the rest of the world doesn't seem to be aware of the existence of this structure!"

"Well," Warra said. "The only vehicles this planet has that can clear this high into the air are rockets, and they're not flying horizontally over a remote location like this. We have to be way up in the stratosphere now; can you tell by how thin the air has become?"

"Yes, I can," Daisy grunted out. She was in the worst condition out of the entire group by far.

"Stay towards the back, Daisy," said Warra.

"I appreciate your concern, but I don't need any special treatment," Daisy assured.

"Your name is a misnomer, Daisy," said Athelstan. "Either that, or you're one tough flower."

The Moirai made their way for the doors, opening and passing through them. On the other side was a foyer that led into an

expansive square hallway that served as a perimeter enclosing a sixty yard drop into an extensively spacious room. The great room had green, brown, and silver walls on all sides of both levels, though portions of the inner walls of the perimeter hallway were absent to allow quick and direct access to the bottom floor. A large part of the center of the bottom floor was indented and made of a form of Plexiglas, allowing one to be able to see directly down below to the surface of the planet. The rest of the room was built with much of the same material that the elevator vestibule was made of, and staircases were also in place at each corner of the complex to get between the top perimeter hallway and the bottom floor should one be incapable of jumping between the two levels.

The pedestal that held the Air Gemstone rested on a platform that was down in the pit but high up enough on the back wall to be just over midway between the bottom floor and the perimeter hallway. Although the top perimeter hallway had a ceiling, there was no ceiling of any sort over the center of the room. That meant the sky above was visible, now appearing as a dark gray overlay of billowing clouds brilliantly highlighted with golden backlighting. Lightning flashed and flickered through the sky nearly every second, bolting freely around the funnels that shifted and shot in all directions through the air above.

"Wow..." Marut said under his breath. "The sky looks much more disturbing up here..."

"What a place for the Air Gemstone to be..." Daisy murmured.

"The atmosphere looks ready to let loose a massive twister," said Athelstan.

"What's that thing down there?" asked Warra, pointing down the drop. A dark-toned figure sat asleep underneath the platform housing the Air Gemstone. At the end of the Moirai of Water's statement, the figure opened its black and yellow eyes and got to its feet.

"I think it heard you, bro," Marut quietly said.

The being stood at eight feet tall with nothing on but a pair of tight

black shorts that had a green "talon" marking on either side. He looked up at the elemental wielders perched on the upper level of the gemstone room, his gaze undeniably heinous. Its dark gray body was humanoid in form and function, although his muscular structure resembled that of a great wolf developed to astounding proportions. His head resembled a cross between an ogre and a bat, and he appeared to have a long tail.

"Come down here and fight," the fiend projected across the huge room. His sharp teeth matched his sharp and reverberating voice.

"He doesn't sound happy with us at all," said Athelstan.

"Then I'll go and quiet him down," Bowser said whilst lighting his claws on fire. He leapt down the great drop into the pit to stand face to face with the demonic being.

"What business do you have here?" the demon figure asked. "I, Nukpana, guard this shrine in the name of Elkon's mission. The corruption of the air element must remain in place. You mortals who wish to interfere will be slain."

"You remind me of a gargoyle," Bowser mused aloud. "A wingless gargoyle. What happened – you didn't get your flying license?"

"Your jokes will get you killed," Nukpana said as he let his energy loose in preparation for battle.

"Who's joking?" Bowser growled, intensifying the flames around his hands.

"This is nice, ain't it Mario?" said Luigi, sipping on a glass.

"Sure is, Luigi," said Mario.

Mario and Luigi both lay in recliners on the shores of the bright and sunny Peach Beach, taking in the sun and sipping on berry mojitos. They looked relaxed and without a worry in the world.

"You know what," Luigi muttered. "This one isn't as spiked as the

last one."

"I don't know why you needa go and spike it," said Mario. "It was fine the way it was."

"I like the smoothness it takes on when it's spiked," Luigi said. "Goes down like ice cream and yogurt."

"Bro!" Mario snapped.

"What? It's true!" Luigi said. "You should try it."

"Maybe another time," Mario replied. "I'm good with this sun and the wonderful weather. We don't get too many of these opportunities to just kick back and take a load off, you know?"

"Yeah," the green plumber agreed.

"Oh, that reminds me," said Mario. "You should see the gunmetal grey armor plates I got for my garb the other day. I got metal overall covers, shoulder plates, knee pads, and a forehead protector for my hat! They latch right on and fit perfectly and they're so easy to put on and take off!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah! Toad fixed it up for me! He could probably fix up some for you too. I'm tellin' ya man, this guy's blacksmith skills just keep getting better and better by the month!"

"Yeah, he's taking that thing real seriously," said Luigi. "He's still got some ways to go with the armor, I think, but man, the library of elemental tools he's got is nothing short of expansive! He oughta turn it into one of those big businesses some day."

"Yeah," Mario said with a laugh. "Then he'll end up like Wario and become rich and famous in some other part of the world, and we'll never see him again aside from the occasional games and competitions we have here in the Mushroom Kingdom."

"Ain't that crazy how that works out?" Luigi asked.

"Oh yeah, it sure is," said Mario.

"Hey, bro?" Luigi began. "You ever thought of retiring? I mean, I know we're still so young and all, but we've done so much already. What about letting someone else take over and show what they can do, you know?"

Mario shrugged. "I've thought of it – but who would take our place?"

"I don't know," Luigi said, trying to think. "But there's gotta be someone who's capable of doing it."

"I'm not doubting that there isn't," Mario replied. "But who would it be?"

Daisy locked her fierce gaze down into the pit on the demon as the lightning overhead continued to illuminate the bottom arena. Bowser stood in wait for whatever potential moves Nukpana would make, yet the demon did not make any, offensive, defensive or otherwise. Bowser still kept his guard up though, and his flaming claws remained at the ready. A few more moments passed and still, no movement was made by the gargoyle. *If he doesn't make a move, then I will* , the Koopa King thought.

"That's interesting," Nukpana suddenly said under his breath.

"What is?" Bowser asked. "The weather up here? Oh yeah, it is, isn't it? It's Elkon's fault, if you didn't realize it yet."

"Your power is what I was referring to," said Nukpana. "It's very impressive; greater than mine is. Too bad you'll all still perish."

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean?" Bowser asked.

"Exactly what I said; did you hear me hesitate?" Nukpana flatly remarked.

Back up in the perimeter hallway overlooking the entire bottom floor, the Moirai watched the scene between Bowser and Nukpana unfold. Nukpana's words did not match his demeanor at all, leaving the

elemental wielders all confused about the situation.

"Why would Nukpana openly admit that his power is lower than Bowser's?" Warra asked.

"Maybe this shrine might be liberated without much effort after all!" said Athelstan.

"No, that's exactly what he wants us to think," Grekka murmured. Daisy and Marut said nothing, both intensely focused on the standoff.

"There's no mistaking it," Nukpana said to Bowser. "I haven't came across many beings with your level of power, but Elkon did mention that I would be dealing with quite a class of destined fighters."

"Look, we're not here for praise," Bowser responded. "We're here to cleanse this shrine and the air element. But in order for us to be able to do that, you need to be gone, so I'm going to get rid of you."

"Is that so?" Nukpana asked. "So why don't you attack me then?"

"What," Bowser gasped in disbelief. He waited for a response, but Nukpana gave none and just stood there. Bowser begrudgingly waited a few moments more to be sure if the demon was serious, before making up his mind. "Alright, you asked for it," he muttered.

Nukpana said nothing and still did not move. Bowser charged forward with his flaming hands and put a powerful hook in Nukpana's jaw, flinging him up into the wall. The koopa rushed forward and with the other hand gave the demon a Smash Punch into his torso before backtracking to his original position. Nukpana stumbled forward before regaining his bearings and returning to his upright, unguarded stance.

"I bet you wished you had up some sort of defense against those hits," Bowser coolly commented. "Why don't you make a move this time?"

Nukpana did not respond for a few seconds, but then moved towards Bowser and stopped to stand in the middle of the Plexiglas indentation that took up roughly three-fourths of the floor. "There, I'm

finished," he announced.

Browser growled with a reddened face. "Oh, c'mon!" he griped. "I didn't mean make that kind of 'move!' Try definition number two!"

"I have made my move," the gargoyle responded. "Attack me if you dare."

"Fine – don't mind if I do!" Bowser yelled, charging forward with an intensely flaming right hand. He got up close to Nukpana once again and slashed his claw at the demon's abdomen. The gashes made by the koopa's slash were instantly cauterized as a result of the flames. However, the lack of knockback and the amount of torsion force from the move left Bowser wide open to a counterattack. The window of opportunity was there and waiting for Nukpana, and Bowser was well aware that he left himself open, yet the demon still did not make any sort of movement or reaction. Bowser then leapt back to regain some distance from the gargoyle and dispelled his flames.

"Why isn't Nukpana fighting back?" Daisy demanded to know.

"This is strange," Warra said under his breath. "I'm inclined to say this is bad, but it's hard to do so when Bowser clearly has the upper hand. If he keeps the pressure on Nukpana, he may end up winning this with relative ease."

"Dismember that grotesque gargoyle, Bowser!" Athelstan yelled down. "He's not even fighting back!"

"Well then, your friends want you to commit to the offensive," said Nukpana. "Are you going to attack me again or not?"

"When I'm ready!" Bowser barked. "You were foolish not to defend against my attacks before and you were foolish not to attempt a counter when I left myself wide open!" The koopa concentrated his energy around his hands once more and reignited the flames around his claws. He thrust both hands forward for his Tavado blast, an attack that produced several thick strands of fire from his palms that spread outwards and then came back together to intertwine just before contact with the target. The target in this case was Nukpana,

who took the blast head on and once again did not attempt any evasion or any defensive tactic.

Daisy had caught sight of something through the flames when Bowser had let loose the blast that looked rather disturbing. *I know I'm up here and somewhat far away, but I could've sworn I just saw Nukpana actually try to urge himself into the blast!* she thought. *But why would he do such a thing?*

Once the resulting smoke from the flames disappeared, a beaten, battered, blitzed and burnt Nukpana stood hunched over, trying to cope with the substantial pain and damage that he made no attempt to prevent. "Very impressive..." he said. "You've confirmed everything that I believed from the start." He started chuckling at the end of his statement.

"Don't you try to talk me up," Bowser growled in a low tone. Sweat started beading on his forehead solely from the confusion and disbelief of everything that had transpired since entering the gemstone room. He could not think of any reason why anyone would leave themselves open to such brutally destructive attacks.

"This is great!" Marut cheered. "This has to be the easiest shrine yet! No dungeon and a boss that wants to sit down and give up? Awesome!"

"One more attack like that and you're finished," Bowser sternly said.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Nukpana beckoned.

"Nothing!" Bowser snapped, holding a supinated hand out in front of him. A fireball flared up in his palm and began rapidly rotating. The fireball soon expanded to twice its size. Bowser caused another flare up of fire elementals in the same palm that changed the color of the flames from red and orange to shades of green. "This is a special technique I've been working on for a while now," he explained. "I was saving its unveiling for a special occasion, but oh well; I guess you'll have to do."

The Moirai of Fire tossed the fireball in the direction of Nukpana, but instead of shooting through the air, it dropped and raced along the

ground. The demon did not dodge or block this attack just as he had not done with the previous attacks and opted to wait for the fireball to hit him. Upon contact with his feet, the green ball of fire opened itself up and sprayed out an intense wave of flames across the entirety of Nukpana's body in fan-like fashion. By the end of the onslaught, the charred gargoyle had bent over in agony, looking eerily close to death. Third-degree burns littered the front of Nukpana's body, altering his appearance into a sickeningly morbid image. The constant lightning strikes overhead gave illumination to the repugnant sight. And left a lasting image in Marut's and Warra's minds.

"I'd rather not snuff out a life, even though you do seem to be a diehard masochist," Bowser solemnly said. "So please, just leave from this place and spare us both the trouble."

The half-dead corpse of Nukpana began maniaclly laughing. No one was sure what to make of the macabre development, but soon, the gargoyle straightened out his posture to continue its stand against Bowser.

"What's going on here?" Bowser asked.

"It's time" Nukpana sharply said, replacing his laughter with a pyschotic smile. "You've done exactly what you were supposed to do! So now, your annihilation begins... It's *over* ."

Bowser grunted and got into a defensive stance. "I should've known you were up to something. That fight was far too easy to be legitimate."

"I have made things too easy for you, but no more," Nukpana asserted. In seconds, his body began to glow with a ghastly green hue.

"What did you do?!" Bowser snarled.

"It's not what I've done; it's what you've helped me to do," said Nukpana. "My body had to be taken to the point of death in order for my special defense metamorphosis to kick in. You made that possible. And now, I will undergo a transformation that will reduce

you to a gory mess."

"Oh, I'm so lucky," said Bowser. "I get to look like you."

"Yes, you are lucky indeed," said Nukpana. "You have no idea of the terror you have just helped me to unleash. Oh, but before I begin, I want you to know that any remote chance you had at beating me is about to go flying out of this aerial arena."

Lightning continued to flutter overhead, highlighting the gargoyle's increasing glow. Winds picked up around Nukpana and extended outwards, threatening to act as a wind tunnel and pull down all the other Moirai into what became the Air Shrine's arena. The gargoyle's body generated a wall of air that shot skyward, causing the clouds above to tremble and quake.

"Great..." Bowser mumbled. "What now..."

"Did you honestly believe I would let you kill me so easily?" Nukpana asked, mid-transformation. "No. Never. Especially not with so much on the line." The demon suddenly sprouted two short, bent horns out of his forehead and two long, curvy horns that jutted out to the sides, followed by wings twice the size of his body.

"Oh..." said Marut. "There are the wings."

Conditions down on the bottom level returned to what they were prior to Nukpana's transformation as his metamorphosis completed. The gargoyle could be heard breathing quite heavily, his whole body vascularity making it appear as if snakes were lining his torso and limbs from underneath his skin. His teeth had lengthened and sharpened, causing them to protrude from his mouth both upwards and downwards. He let out a blood-curdling roar that resembled that of an undead dragon who just had a support beam jammed clear through its chest.

"Elkon sure knows how to pick 'em," Bowser groaned. He re-flared flames around his hands and staggered his feet to further stabilize his stance.

Chapter XXI

Sky Arena: Gargoyle Nukpana Phase Two :

Nukpana stood in his new form, power oozing outwards. Almost all of the damage he received from Bowser had vanished, and there was no trace or evidence of any of the attacks that the Koopa King made apart from a few scratches and almost unnoticeable scars.

"This form must be very powerful to warrant almost dying just so he could access it," said Warra.

"This form must be in the realm of the forbidden if it warrants almost dying just to be able to use it," Daisy added.

"Bowser doesn't have a chance," Grekka suddenly said. His statement garnered the attention of all the Moirai that stood with him up at the top level.

"Are you sure about that?" Athelstan asked. "I don't think we can say something like that so soon, right?"

Bowser's claws crackled with flames, the standoff with the newly formed Nukpana growing tenser with each passing second. Compared to just moments ago, the fiend looked none the worse from the lethal attacks that he endured from the Koopa King.

"Not only does my body heal and regenerate back to baseline, but I receive a substantial boost in power," Nukpana said. "Enough to render all six of you helpless against my might."

"I find that hard to believe in spite of your art show you just displayed," Bowser spat out. "Forgive me for being a skeptic."

"I can guarantee you that the awakening of this form has all but sealed each of your fates," said Nukpana. "This form was locked away in my body for centuries. Elkon convinced me that in fighting for him, I would almost certainly be able to unseal this form from its prison through confrontation with the destined warriors. I am quite

pleased with the results."

"You're welcome," Bowser nonchalantly said. "But that doesn't mean you're going to win."

"Oh, yes it does," Nukpana whispered back. "Don't believe me? Observe."

The gargoyle flapped its wings and took off high into the sky, highlighted by the constant lightning that flashed every second on average. He began to rapidly twirl his body in midair and wrap himself inside of a pseudo-tornado, then dove back down and made a beeline straight for Bowser. The Moirai of Fire quickly turned his shell to deflect the streaking whirlwind back up into the air, only for the twister to reach an apex and redirect back at the Koopa King. Bowser deflected again with his shell, this time sending the revolving gargoyle sideways. A massive windstorm resulted in the bottom floor from Nukpana's rapid rotations that knocked Bowser off his feet, leaving him wide open to attack.

Nukpana erratically encircled the arena before aiming himself at Bowser. Still with the tornado around him, he lifted the koopa off of his feet and brought him skyward high above the room. At this point, with both of them high in the air, Nukpana dispelled his winds and did a somersault that whipped his tail around and smacked Bowser back down into the arena. The koopa broke his velocity in midair by use of his Whirling Fortress maneuver to dispel his momentum and allow a landing with minimal shock. He then began to focus an extraordinarily high amount of fire energy in his mouth and spat out multiple expanding balls of fire at the flying creature. One giant flap of Nukpana's wings created a wickedly strong gust of wind that caused the incoming fire to die out in midair. Through the ensuing smoke, Nukpana dove down again in another pseudo-tornado and caught Bowser off guard, slamming into the koopa and sending him flying across the room. Nukpana flew with Bowser and grabbed a hold of him as they headed towards the wall. The gargoyle spun around twice to generate torsion force and threw Bowser at the ground before they reached the wall, then made a landing on the wall itself and rebounded off of it to stay airborne.

The lightning in the sky began to become a bit more violent. In a

strange move, Nukpana flew up high into the air to draw and get hit by a stray lightning strike. Amazingly, the gargoyle was not harmed from the lightning and proceeded to descend and land back in the arena. Bowser got up and charged a sphere of flames in his right claw, then shot it off at the demon who made a swift, long leap sideways to avoid the attack. Bowser charged another sphere in his left claw and fired off that one just to see Nukpana dodge it as well.

"Your aim is as broad as your shell," Nukpana taunted with disinterest. "Can you *at least try* to hit me next time?"

"Why you louse!" Bowser growled, charging up another flaming sphere, this one larger than the previous two. At the firing of this sphere, Nukpana shielded himself with his humongous wings. After the block, the demon thrust himself at Bowser and latched onto the koopa's wrist using his tail. Nukpana swung his tail upwards and threw the koopa high into the air, then took off in pursuit. Bowser had to have been over five hundred yards above the gemstone room by the time he stopped rising, and Nukpana was right up next to him in mere seconds.

Bowser reignited his flaming hands to attack while he hand a chance. The cross he threw missed as Nukpana twirled out of the way. The second cross missed again, Nukpana edging out of the way as the fist came through in a similar manner to the first. Bowser slammed both hands together and blasted the flames around his hands at Nukpana, though the gargoyle flipped himself up in time and the blast went soaring off into the distance. Bowser quickly flared more fire around his claws and stuck both arms straight out to perform a weaponless Spin Attack, catching the gargoyle in the jaw and sending him downwards. In one smooth transition, he chained the Spin Attack into another Tavado blast aimed at the plummeting gargoyle that also served to momentarily stop the koopa's downward momentum. The fires made contact with the gargoyle and created a massive puff of smoke. As Bowser fell though the smoke, Nukpana quickly recovered and circled around to the bottom of the fiery cloud to catch the koopa and fling him high up into the air again.

"This battle's making me nauseous..." Daisy moaned as she stared up.

Before meeting Bowser, Nukpana made another unorthodox move by drawing another bolt of lightning towards himself. Again, he was unharmed and continued up to the apex of Bowser's ascent.

"Stop with this aerial crap!" Bowser yelled as he made a somersault kick to stomp down on the incoming demon. The hard hit to the head sent Nukpana fluttering downwards, but only for a couple seconds as he twirled out of the hitstun and angled himself back at the now descending koopa. Flying at him much faster, Nukpana rose up like a missile and clipped Bowser in his side to put him into an awkward tailspin. Nukpana turned around to aim himself at his fast falling opponent and again made himself into a pseudo-tornado. The demon soon was up on Bowser and caught him within the whirlwinds to force him down into the ground even faster.

As they came crashing down into the floor, Nukpana dispelled the twister and made a hard curve back up into the air. Bowser slammed hard into the ground, causing much of his vitality to fade. Nukpana ascended back up into the air and took another bolt of lightning before dropping all the way back down to rest his feet on the Plexiglas floor.

Why does he keep going up in the air to let himself get struck by that lightning storm? Warra thought. *Unless... Oh...now I believe I see...*

Bowser struggled to stand up. The repeated aerial bouts and the crash landing evoked unrelenting jarring in his head and body. Nukpana stood not too far away with his arms crossed in contentment.

"Do you still believe that my idle state earlier was foolish and that you will prevail in this battle?" Nukpana asked.

"Yes," Bowser said, charging immense amounts of fire energy in his palms that created glowing orange and white orbs. The moment he brought his hands forward and together, a beam of plasma emerged and shot out at Nukpana. The demon took the hit head on, caught off guard by the magnitude of the attack. His body tumbled backwards clear across the middle of the room before coming to a stop near a corner, but didn't stay down for long. After regaining his footing, Nukpana shot vertically into the air yet again to take another

hit from a lightning strike.

"Alright," Bowser muttered. "This guy has to be a masochist. I'm certain of it now."

"It's just as I thought," Grekka said, somber in tone.

"Bowser's in trouble; one of us has to take over now!" Athelstan urged.

"Let me fight him!" Marut asserted. "I fight my best in the air!"

"No, Marut," Warra quickly said. "If you try and face him, you'll only make him stronger. He seems to be drawing power from the storms, so any lightning technique you use on him will do nothing but empower him even more, and I doubt that any sort of standard air attack would be sufficient enough to bring him down." At the conclusion of his statement, Warra jumped down from out of the perimeter hallway to join Bowser. Nukpana did not hurry in his downward descent, seeing that a lull in action had developed.

"Bowser," said Warra. "Do you think you'll be able to beat this demon?"

"To be honest, no," Bowser murmured. "I don't have much energy left, but I don't need him to hear that."

"Withdraw," Warra then said, calm and without hesitation. "I'll stand in and finish."

"Are you sure?" asked Bowser. "You've seen what this guy is capable of doing."

"I don't think any one of us can overpower this demon, to be frank," stated the Moirai of Water.

"Is that so?" the Koopa King asked. "Then how do you suggest going about beating this gargoyle?"

"I have an idea that *may* work," said Warra. "But if it doesn't work, then we'll just have to see what happens. As it stands now though, it's the best possible chance we have of beating Nukpana."

Bowser nodded and turned to the flight of stairs in the corner behind him to ascend to the perimeter hallway above. Warra stood and calmly readied himself for combat as Nukpana returned to the ground.

"What's this? Substitutions?" Nukpana asked. "It makes no difference. You'll all fall sooner or later. Then I shall return to the surface and ravage the lands the way I was supposed to before my true form was sealed inside me."

Warra ignored the remark, instead giving one of his own. "It's pretty interesting that Elkon would enlist someone like you who seems to just want to conquer and dominate the planet. I wonder if maybe he's just using you..."

"If he is, then no matter," said Nukpana. "Now that I have my full power in my control again, I will hunt him down for his deception."

"Well, that's neither here nor there," Warra replied. "It was just a thought of mine that I had."

"Warra, I hope you know what you're doing," Athelstan said under his breath.

"Grekka," said Daisy. "You beat Vodyanoy without issue, so how well do you think you stack up against Nukpana?"

Grekka paused for a few moments, trying to figure out an accurate estimate based on what Nukpana had shown and how much energy the fiend was emitting. "I could beat him," he then said. "It wouldn't be as swift as it was against that creature at Delight City, but I'm certain I would eventually beat him."

"Really?!" Daisy exclaimed. "You're kidding!"

"Then since you're the most powerful one here, why didn't you go down and take Bowser's place?" Athelstan asked.

"Warra made the move," said Grekka as Bowser rejoined the group. "So let's see what he can do."

The lightning in the sky ramped up its frequency and intensity,

contrasting with the funnel clouds that were increasing in number and now billowing through the air in a slow descent into the troposphere. Nukpana stared down the Moirai of Water with intrigue, wondering what the man in blue was up to. *If I'm not mistaken, this one's power is actually just slightly lower than the fire wielder,* the gargoyle thought. *What is their rationale for sending him down next? Very interesting...*

I'll test him out first to see if my idea would work, Warra thought. *I should also do my best to stay on the ground as much as I can. The last thing I need is to get hurled up into the air where he'll have the advantage.*

An eerie silence momentarily developed in the arena. The only sounds that could be heard came from the thunder and whirlwinds overhead. Warra stood in a rather balanced stance, awaiting any advances or sudden movements from the powerful demon.

"Please explain to me why *you* are facing me now," Nukpana requested.

He knows that I'm not the most powerful one of the group, the Moirai of Water thought. *That means he'll be impatient in dealing with me. He's probably aware that Grekka's the biggest threat and was therefore expecting him to jump down here. Well, if my idea works, then it doesn't matter how powerful you actually are, Nukpana, nor does it matter how much more powerful you are than I.* He then said to the gargoyle, "I'm facing you now because I'm pretty certain that I can take you down."

"Then elaborate on what you could do that could possibly be a threat to me," said Nukpana.

"I won't," said Warra. "But I will say this..." He began focusing his elemental energy into his palms, although he took care not to actually conjure water.

"It looks like Warra is going to try and draw upon the advanced form of water," Grekka said from above.

"So what does that entail?" Athelstan asked. "I've never actually

seen it before from any water wielder."

"Just watch," said Grekka. "Or rather, just listen."

"Water is highly involved with vibrations and the transference of such," Warra said while continuing to build upon his collected energy. "And vibrations result in the production of sound, hence the properties of this upcoming attack."

Nukpana grunted in distaste, but had no chance for reaction once Warra struck the palms of his hands together. A concussive wave battered Nukpana and assaulted his eardrums with a short but intense bout of ultra-high volume rumbling, forcing him onto his back and temporarily ruining his sense of hearing. For a few moments afterwards, all the gargoyle could hear was a persistent ringing. He stood up once the ringing began to subside, flustered that the attack was so quick.

Warra smiled at his handiwork. "And since compressional waves move faster in water, a sonic attack can be even more instantaneous than it already is. However, since you were relatively close, I opted to not add any water and just let the sonic wave move through the air to allow me to conserve energy for later on. Using sonics drains a considerable amount of power, as do most of the advanced forms of elements."

"Very impressive," Nukpana complimented. "I for one, however, believe that the only sounds that should be heard so audibly-" He took off for Warra and gave an unblockable double spin kick to the water wielder, who subsequently skidded along the ground after contact but managed to bounce back to his feet. "...Are the sounds of anguish and suffering produced by humans," the gargoyle finished.

"He didn't seem to be too pleased about that last one," said Athelstan.

"I wouldn't either," said Bowser. "Warra must've turned a heavy metal concert into a projectile."

The lightning had become so frequent and intense that it threatened

to strike down to the floor of the gemstone room. As time continued to elapse, the lightning increased in erratic violence. Nukpana however, did not seem to mind.

I have to land another attack on him, Warra thought. *That should be enough to see if my idea will be effective...* He began concentrating his energy again, except this time into only one of his palms. Nukpana got ready to strike and sprung forward at Warra with a fist that cut through the air. Warra swiftly maneuvered out of the way and then evaded the gargoyle's followup cross from the opposite hand by leaping back a couple times. Nukpana swung his tail around and knocked Warra in his head, causing the Moirai of Water to stumble backwards even further. Despite that, Warra kept the energy charged in his hand and leapt forward to land a palm strike on Nukpana's sternum. The hit was not forceful at all, but was somehow sufficient enough to leave the demon gagging on his knees. The shock on Nukpana's face came more from the surprise of the effectiveness of the attack than anything else.

"Why did that hurt so much?!" Nukpana gasped.

"It's my favorite technique," said Warra. "The Focus Palm. I concentrate energy on a single point in the palm of my hand, and as that point makes contact during an attack, the energy enters and spreads throughout the target, just as a drop of water vibrates outwards in a pond."

Nukpana quickly got back to his feet. "You are a very enthralling fighter indeed," the demon said in praise. "Skilled...tactical...efficient ... If your power was more substantial, then your moves would actually be a danger to me..."

The gargoyle made a massive hop backwards and then leapt into the air to draw lightning to himself once more. Warra paid special attention to how Nukpana seemed to leave himself wide open to the strike, absorb it in its entirety, and then touchdown on the ground, displaying that the Moirai of Water's Focus Palm and Sonic Clap were both quickly forgotten.

"That's exactly what I wanted to see," Warra murmured.

"Warra is very cunning," said Grekka.

"What do you mean?" Marut asked.

It's as I thought, Warra said in his mind. *He's somehow able to draw power from the lightning, and in doing so is able to replenish his own energy as well as rejuvenate and even strengthen himself. So as long as he has the lightning on his side, he's practically invulnerable now...but this next move should exploit that to its fullest...and secure the victory for us...*

"You try that Focus Palm again, I'm snapping your hands off," Nukpana coldly declared.

"Don't worry, I have just the thing for you," said Warra. "You're gonna love this; trust me."Drawing from the dense humidity of the atmosphere, Warra began to form several spherical bundles of water scattered about around him. *This will be a simple tactic,* he thought. *But I'll have to do it quick to make sure that I don't take myself out in the process as well.*

"I fail to see what you hope to accomplish by surrounding yourself with random spheres of water," Nukpana said with annoyance as Warra kept molding more water spheres.

"He's taking advantage of the lightning storm," said Grekka.

"He is?!" Bowser asked. "But how?"

"Warra is concentrating all the ever-increasing humidity in the air into several separate orbs of water," Grekka explained. "He's trying to gather as much as he can focus."

"I don't get it," said Marut. "What does that have to do with the lightning?"

"Nothing at the moment," Grekka replied. "But just watch what happens when he pulls all the water together."

What occurred next happened in under just a few seconds. Once he had accumulated enough orbs of water, Warra quickly pulled all the masses of fluid into one ultra-concentrated sphere no larger than a

beach ball. As soon as all the water finished combining, he fired it off. The densely-packed water acted as a hyper-magnet that drew dozens of bolts of lightning as it flew through the air. The blast attracted and contained over sixty-three terawatts of power as a result of the collective electricity. Seeing that the incoming projectile was full of lightning, Nukpana did not try to dodge or counter and instead allowed the blast to hit him, thinking that Warra made the worst mistake possible by sending him all that energy. As Warra predicted, Nukpana willingly absorbed all the captured lightning from the water blast. However, the demon did not know or realize at any point how much power he was actually absorbing, and was therefore unprepared for the massive surge in energy within his body.

"What did you do?!" Nukpana yelled in a high-pitched growl. "WHY?! THIS IS TOO MUCH! DAMN YOU!" His body could not even come close to handling the enormous and irrepressible power he had absorbed. The energy completely overran him, a demonic shriek escaping the gargoyle's body as it literally burst from all the absorbed energy. The lightning escaped from Nukpana's exploding body and zapped off in randomized directions, including at Warra. Luckily, he had anticipated the recoil and had a wall of water in front of him to take the strike instead. Intense winds blew through and scattered the remains of Nukpana all around the bottom level and then up into the atmosphere.

"You guys need to hurry and get to the Air Gemstone now!" Warra yelled up to the Moirai. Marut and Bowser sprinted across to the other side of the top perimeter and dropped down from one of the gaps in the inner wall onto the gemstone platform. Wasting no time, Bowser took out the Dimensional Mirror and aimed it at the Air Gemstone, allowing Marut to direct his elemental air energy through the lens and consequently at the gemstone itself.

After a couple minutes of concentration and energy release highlighted by the frantic lightning and increasing winds, the Air Gemstone gave off a lively glow, signifying that the air element had returned to its normal state. Slowly, the weather began to ease up. The lighting ceased, the raging funnel clouds calmed, and the dense cloud cover opened up to golden cracks that the sun attempted to shine through. The winds cutoff and died down, leaving the

atmosphere in a peaceful quiet. Daisy, Grekka, and Athelstan jumped down to join Warra as Marut and Bowser leapt off the platform to regroup with their them.

"Amazing," said Athelstan. "Throughout all that, this great shrine in the sky not only remained whole and standing, but didn't even sway or jostle around. The ancients had technology that we can't even comprehend."

"Nor would I want to try to," Bowser remarked. "I don't know what's worse to try and think about; how this shrine was built or how people are able to build smart tech that's smaller than my finger."

"Very clever, Warra," said Daisy. "None of us would have thought of it. Grekka was the only one even aware of what you were doing, and it looked like Nukpana himself never noticed it either."

"Until it was too late, that is," added Athelstan.

"Why didn't you just let me do the lightning, bro?" Marut asked. "It would've been more direct that way."

"Marut," said Warra. "You would not have been able to generate nearly as much lightning on your own even if you used up all your power in trying to do so. The only way to gather enough was to manipulate the lightning that was already being produced from up above, just as Nukpana was taking advantage of it as well."

"Maybe you should look into being a covert agent or joining the special ops," Althestan commented with a laugh. "That was deviously brilliant!"

"In a way, I was back at my homeland," Warra said as he put a hand behind his head. "Fun fact; if that was pure, distilled water, that tactic would've failed. Water needs impurities to be the conductor everyone always makes it out to be!"

Bowser and Athelstan grunted in dumbstruck expressions. "That's twice you gambled like that now!" the Koopa King shouted.

"Not really," Warra replied. "I knew that the atmosphere always has the necessary impurities in it. I just didn't know how much lightning I

was supposed to attract so I kinda...guessed!"

"What do you mean you guessed?!" Bowser and Athelstan yelled in unison.

"Well, if I didn't have enough lightning gathered..." Warra began explaining while rubbing his nose. "Then...he would've absorbed it all without issue and I would've basically made him really overpowered...to the point where not even Grekka would've beaten him."

"You inconsistent bastard!" Daisy shouted. "Why were you heckling me at the Water Shrine just for you yourself to be straight-up reckless here?!"

"I guess you're starting to rub off on me!" said Warra, trying to both justify himself and laugh off the lack of caution. "Sorry guys! I know I'm usually more careful but I guess we all can have our impulsive moments every once in a while!" He kept laughing as Bowser and Athelstan both fell over on their faces in shock.

Daisy sighed and then smiled. "That's the last thing I expected from you, Warra."

"You got that right!" Bowser griped.

"Well, the air element has been purified!" Marut cheered with multiple fist pumps. "No more nightmares for me!"

"Yeah," said Daisy. "And now, we head to the Ice Shrine."

Chapter XXII

The Northernmost West :

Approximately seven hours passed since the liberation of the Air Shrine from Gargoyle Nukpana. The six Moirai – Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Marut, Grekka, and Daisy – left Memory Forest as soon as they had finished purifying the air element and headed to where the Ice Shrine would be in what was the region furthest to the northwest of the continent, a region known colloquially as, "The Northernmost West." This area was a moderately large polar region harboring a handful of smaller, more widespread communities. The increasingly treacherous environment had caused Bowser to prematurely stop the Offroader.

"What the hell, Athelstan!" Bowser growled. "I thought we weren't supposed to be getting into the polar areas for another three miles!"

"We weren't!" Athelstan responded.

"The corruption of the ice element caused an expansion of the subarctic tundra," said Grekka. "It was expanding before I left, although it didn't reach this far out."

"See?" said Athelstan with his hands up.

"It'll be hell trying to drive the truck through this icy mess," Bowser muttered. "And we don't need our only transport getting damaged. We'll just have to walk a little extra, that's all."

The elemental fighters disembarked the Offroader and surveyed the timberland-tundra environment. The frosty greenery of the uneven ground was covered with a mixture of snow and ice, and more frost cloaked the scattered trees in the area. The green and purple northern lights brilliantly filled up the middle levels of the sky, reflecting off the white ground and giving brightness to the region that made every shape and color clearly visible as if an LED shined from underground. The temperature of the atmosphere, however, did not match the surroundings.

"Why is it so warm here?" Daisy asked. "It's well above freezing! This ice and snow should all be at least starting to melt!"

"Have the very properties of ice been changed?" Warra asked. "It's not that cold here at all! And yet, all this ice and snow still remains!"

"I'm more concerned about the spreading of the subarctic," said Bowser. "And more likely than not, the ensuing spread of the arctic region overtop the subarctic, and outwards."

"It may very well be possible that the ice is slowly attempting to cover the entire world," said Athelstan.

"Man," Marut said, sighing. "Can you guys imagine what it would be like if we had let the corruption of all the elements spread? Like, what it would be like if everything we've seen so far that went wrong with nature all happened at once all over the world?"

"I try not to," Grekka murmured.

"If that were to happen, I would've thought I was high the whole time it was going on," said Athelstan.

"Let's move along then," Bowser directed. "The route we must take to the Ice Shrine won't lead us through any towns or cities, so it's a straight shot to the Ice Shrine and a straight shot back."

The Moirai trekked over the frozen tundra and eased their way into the more arctic region of The Northernmost West. As they moved deeper into the area, the amount of trees dwindled, the land evened itself out, and the snowy ground of permafrost transitioned more and more into ice. Before long, they were walking along a flat sheet of ice and frozen ground that had very little plant life.

"There's something strange about this place..." murmured Daisy.

"There's been something strange about every place we've been," said Marut.

"No, I mean eerily strange," Daisy said. "This place feels so...lonely..."

"Figuratively or literally?" said Warra. "Because I'm having a hard time trying to sense out any sentient beings in this area; it's like this whole region is a ghost town!"

"That's because there are none," said Grekka. "The entire population of The Northernmost West is dead."

"You can't be serious!" Bowser exclaimed.

"The entire population is gone?" Warra asked with concern.

"Yes," said Grekka. "A powerful entity swept through this area several days ago in a swath of bloodshed and wiped out everyone, including my small town two miles to the north of here, the town of Kareah."

"We're sorry to hear, Grekka," said Warra.

"Yeah...sorry dude," said Marut.

"It's fine," said Grekka. "I don't care about them."

"What do you mean?" Marut asked, puzzled by the response.

"Exactly what I said," Grekka responded, maintaining his somber and dainty voice. "I hate to see so much unnecessary death and I hate the fact that all these lives were lost, but I don't care about those people. They never cared about me. I was practically invisible to them and hated by those who knew me, including my family, who saw me as nothing more than a child that they were forced to take care of by law. I'm nineteen now; they couldn't wait for me to leave a year ago. So why should I care that everyone's gone? I'm concerned with the person that was capable of doing it all and no one else. No one being should have authority and control over who and how many die. But for those who he killed, I shed no tears."

"Grekka," Warra said, alarmed. "Now I'm sure they couldn't have meant to be that harsh and apathetic..."

"I don't know Warra, that sounds pretty bad to me," said Athelstan. "But why would they act like that to you, Grekka?"

"I was born with a great deal of elemental energy," said Grekka. "My power was foreseen to develop into one of the most formidable in the world. However, the village saw my existence as a curse to theirs, so they treated me as such. They feared I would one day use my natural gifts to overtake the region and become a warlord. You see, the people that were here in The Northernmost West were in a very remote region of the world compared to other places, and as such, they were hypersensitive to threats, both external and internal. They did not want their way of life threatened, even though I gave them no reason to think that I would show any hostility. As time passed, a mutual dislike developed. My whole life was me versus all of Kareah."

"I wouldn't brood on it too much, Grekka," said Warra. "People fear what they don't understand, what they don't know, and consequently, what they don't want to know. I would think that they felt that it would be easier for them to do what they did instead of trying to understand who you actually are."

"And yet, I understand why they reacted the way they did," said Grekka. "There seems to be a common trend that anyone in our world today that has access to substantial power is all but guaranteed to misuse it to try and one-up everyone else. That's not to say that everyone will – because we ourselves haven't – but it's a trend nonetheless. So I understand the apprehension they had in trusting me and accepting me, but I still hate them for all that they had put me through because of it...so I reiterate my question; why should I care? In the end, I was always alone..."

Alone, Daisy echoed in her mind. That word resonated within her, acting as a catalyst that would take her back into her memories. *Alone...*

"So how have things been going for you in your life as Princess of Sarasaland, Daisy?" Master Terran asked. Terran and Daisy had been sitting high on a tall hill in King Sarasa's castle's extensive backyard that gave way to a modest view of the city and the early evening sun.

"It sucks!" Daisy yelled. "I've never had a single friend in my life! I'm tired of those dresses and economics lessons and language tutors – I can't learn a single phrase in a language that's not English! I can't even get any time to play sports now. Training with you is the only sport I have, and my parents are only allowing it now so that I can learn self-defense. They don't trust me enough to let me handle anything involving the advanced moves... They don't think I can do anything..."

"Well, that certainly doesn't sound too pleasant at all," said Terran. "But I'm certain that it'll all pass if you give it the time it needs to transpire. Don't let the problems of now shape or impact your future. You're only twelve years old now; there's a lot that you haven't seen or experienced yet!"

"You should hear the other kids and what they say about me," Daisy grumbled. "It's like everyday, they come up with a reason to hate me more and more! Just because my parents won't let me have any friends, the other kids think that I think I'm too good for them! Even the ones that seemed like they would be cool people! They hate me because of my status as royalty and they think I'm stuck up because of it! But it's not true, master! It's not true at all!"

"I know, Daisy, I know," Terran gently assured. "Although I am surprised that you're receiving so much negativity. Just remember not to pay any mind to it. From what I've been able to tell over the years in the short time that I've been around, people are going to judge you no matter what you do in life. Because that's the case, just focus on doing everything that you want to do and don't give any attention to what other people think."

"That's hard to do when my mother and father won't let me do what I actually want to do," murmured Daisy. "I wanna get on the Olympic weightlifting team! I bet some day, I could snatch eight hundred kilos and clean and jerk a thousand kilos – all for reps! I'll be stronger than people that are twice my size! And I wanna be fast too! I wanna be one of the fastest on record, so I can run away with all the track and field medals while I'm racing down the soccer field around everybody! And then, if I took that power and speed to baseball, I'd be one of the best players to play the game! Maybe I could have my own breakfast cereal!"

"Wow, you've got quite the competitive spirit!" Terran praised with a laugh. "Olympic weightlifter, track and field star, baseball slugger, elite soccer forward; that's quite a list of goals, Daisy. That's good. Ambition is a driver of success in the strong-willed, and you have the strongest that I've seen. You'll be one of the best athletes out there, and you'll definitely be one of the most powerful and formidable earth wielders out there as well."

Daisy blushed and made a big grin. Terran always seemed to know how to make everything feel better.

"There's no mistaking that," said Terran. "You'll find that as you become more and more successful, people will tend to hate you more for what you've accomplished. It's really a twisted ordeal and you wouldn't have thought that it would be that way, but you'd be surprised what people say about others when no one's aware of it. Sometimes, it's just out of jealousy and envy. Other times, it's discontent with their own selves. But, you know what they say; it's pretty lonely up at the top."

"It's lonely now," Daisy mumbled. "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you here with me."

"Well, the life of a politician is a lonely – and angry – life, especially in this era that we're in, and like it or not, that's what you are...for now, at least. I'm sure your parents have their reasons...but to be honest, I'm not too sure if their reasons are really the best..." Terran's face then grew somewhat stern. "What makes it worse is that your parents don't appreciate you for the talent and latent abilities that you have, and are trying to force you into a life that you're just not meant to lead. You'd be much better off in life with an occupation you enjoy rather than doing something that you have no passion for."

"I wish they got that..." Daisy said under her breath.

It became quiet for a couple moments, then suddenly, Terran's face became dark and intense without any prior warning. "Daisy," he said. "Listen. There will come a day where you'll have to leave this place. You'll have to run far away from here. Now's not the time, but you will need to leave here in the not so distant future. I'd rather not

tell you why, but promise me that you will leave here before you become an adult."

"If it involves getting away from my parents, then I'll do it for sure," Daisy muttered with her arms crossed. "But only if you come with me, okay?"

"What – but why do you need me to come along?" Terran asked.

"Why not?" Daisy asked. "You're the only person around here that I can stand, and apparently you're the only one that can stand me. Please?"

Terran didn't say anything, but looked into Daisy's eyes and saw all the pain and frustration locked within her. It was something he knew existed within her for some time, but now more than ever, it became evermore apparent that her angst and distress was increasing. After a while, he then responded, "...Sure."

…I still ended up leaving alone... Daisy thought. *But it was my fault, Not yours. I hope I didn't cause you any trouble...*

"Even now, I wonder if my parents made a mistake in bringing me into existence," Grekka thought aloud. "I wondered if I was supposed to hate everyone, or hate myself...and then I wondered if everyone would be better off if I just killed myself...but I never had the courage to bring myself to do it."

"But you had the courage to withstand that adversity," said Warra. "And look what you turned out to be; a great warrior who saved dozens of lives from a watery grave and is now part of a team that's in the process of stopping the collapse of nature itself. I hate to think what would've happened if you hadn't intercepted Vodyanoy that night."

"Yeah, we weren't even sure where that water demon would've struck first," Bowser added.

Grekka appeared to try and say something, but didn't and returned to bowing his head. He allowed his eyes to be concealed in the

shadow of his hair.

"Can you guys believe we've gotten this far?" Marut asked.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Athelstan added. "Fire, stone, earth, water, and air have all been returned to their normal states. We've got three more to go; ice, light, and shadow. And then we confront Elkon once this last bunch of turmoil is cleared up."

"Hey," said Daisy, squinting. She tried making out a figure off in the distance in front of them who had its back turned. "Is that Mario?"

"What would he be doing out here of all places?" Bowser asked. The Moirai rushed forward to get closer to the fidgeting figure moving about near a lake on the right but stopped once they noticed that it wasn't Mario at all. The metal figure took notice of the elemental wielders' presence and aggressively turned around, getting in stance to ready itself for battle.

"That's not Mario..." Bowser said. "It's a metal body...that looks like a Mario!"

"What does that mean?!" Marut shouted.

"It means that a metal version of Mario is trying to fight us," Daisy answered.

"Why do I hear music coming from it..." Warra mumbled.

"Let me see what I can do about this," Athelstan said, moving to the front of the group. Metal Mario did not show any hesitation at all once it saw that the brown-clothed fighter had stepped up. The metal body ran at the Moirai of Stone, looked ready to pound everything in its sight. Athelstan quickly leapt to the side and unsheathed and swung his halberd at Metal Mario all in one smooth motion. Unfortunately, the blade caused negligible knockback and instead bounced off Metal Mario's head.

"Well, that's kinda what I was expecting..." Athelstan muttered. Unable to come up with an effective way to block in time, Athelstan took the kick from Metal Mario and skidded over to his teammates.

"What was that?" Daisy asked. "Why did you just use your halberd on it? It's made of metal!"

"What do ya want me to do?" Athelstan griped. "Slam my fist into metal? I thought that he was hollow!"

"I don't know..." said Warra. "He doesn't look like he's hollow..."

"Yeah, well now I know that!" Athelstan replied in haste. Marut sent in a gust of wind to blow back the metal character once it had started to make a move towards the group.

"A being made entirely of metal, but with the full mobility of a human?" Bowser asked. "That makes no sense! My ears are being grated just trying to imagine that!"

"I can't do anything with stone while we're out here in this ice laden land," said Athelstan. Before the stone wielder had even finished his sentence, Grekka dashed forward at Metal Mario with ice shards in his hands that possessed ultra-fine points. He thrust both the shards into the metal being's body, piercing into its torso and forcing it back a great deal of distance. The Moirai heard metal being ripped and crunched as Grekka forced the shards deeper into the metal body until the shards snapped. Metal Mario was unfazed despite being impaled from the two ice shards and smacked Grekka backwards and into the air with the back of its hand. Grekka flipped out of the hitstun and landed in front of his teammates, but Metal Mario was again already jogging its way towards the Moirai.

"We can't fight this thing; it's immune to all attack," Grekka grimly stated.

"Then let's not fight it at all," said Warra. "It's made of metal, and if its entire inside is made of metal, then it has to be *really* heavy. So... Marut, do you see that lake to our right?"

"I know where you're going with this," said Marut, channeling a vicious gust of wind into Metal Mario. The burst knocked Metal Mario off its feet and forced it into a series of backwards somersaults that projected it into the nearby lake.

"Freeze the top!" Warra shouted. "Quickly! Before he recovers and comes out!"

Grekka sprinted to the edge of the lake and performed a quick-freeze on the surface in front of him, then expanded the quick-freeze outwards to affect the entire top of the body of water in case the metal figure decided to detour around the ice. He finished in under a half-minute since the lake was conveniently small. The ice cover was six inches thick and appeared to be remarkably sturdy. Intermittent thuds occurred every several seconds as a result of the metal being trying to force its way out of the trap.

"Warra, you're too clever," said Bowser.

"You're welcome," the Moirai of Water said.

"That quick-freeze is not going to last forever," said Grekka. "We should keep moving."

The team of six continued on their way to the Ice Shrine with haste to make sure they were gone from the area and out of the sight should Metal Mario break free. The sky was now almost pitch black, making the aurora lights overhead more pronounced. The lights in the air resembled a misty river to the right and cascading towers in the center and on the left, forcing the moon to take the backseat in the scenery.

"Was Metal Mario the one who caused the eradication of the population here?" Bowser asked Grekka.

"No, I did not see that form at any point in time before I left to join you guys," the Moirai of Ice responded. "It was someone entirely different and far more menacing than that metal body. This mobile metal figure was nowhere near here a few days ago when I left to join you."

"Then how'd it even get here in the first place?" Warra asked.

"I don't know," said Grekka. "The one who caused the deaths is the being I tried to defeat and destroy in the Ice Shrine. He's the guardian that was appointed by Elkon. I just narrowly escaped that

encounter."

"Sounds like we've really got our hands full this time," said Athelstan.

"And you're saying that as powerful as you are, you couldn't stop him?" asked Daisy. "Who are we dealing with here?"

"We're dealing with a being that epitomizes the phrase 'cold-blooded' and is the embodiment of the word 'sinister,' " Grekka broodingly replied. "He is Kokoro, the Soul Stealer."

"Soul Stealer?" Bowser asked.

"He murders his victims and then steals their souls," Grekka explained. "I don't know what he does with the souls or even if he actually draws power from them or not, but he has been alive for a while and is actually quite notorious in some cultures and areas of the world. He uses a lot of hit-and-run tactics and ranged offense. I was unable to find out any weaknesses of his nor was I able to figure out how he could be beaten. For me to have been able to get away from him and still be alive...is a miracle in and of itself. He is awe-inspiringly powerful."

"He's that bad?" Daisy asked, a little intrigue mixed into her focus.

"He may be the worst of the guardians," said Grekka. "Unless someone worse is stationed in either the Light Shrine or Shadow Shrine. Though, I highly doubt that."

"Then that's good news," said Daisy. "Because if we can beat him, then we will have that much better of a chance of beating Elkon."

"No," Grekka said. "We must find a way to purify the shrine without confronting him. Any conflict we engage in with him will lead to death."

"Sorry, but I don't run or hide," Daisy remarked with mild annoyance. "We'll face him and beat him just like we did with everyone else."

"I don't feel comfortable leaving one of Elkon's guards in any shrine," said Warra.

"I agree!" said Athelstan. "If we purify the shrine and then leave, then Kokoro may very well just tamper with it again, or do something to the shrine and the gemstone worse than what has already happened to them! We've got no choice. We'll just have to take him down."

"...If you truly believe it's the right course of action, then fine," Grekka deferred. "I will fight with him first and weaken him as best as I can. Then, one of you will have to take over and finish." The other five Moirai agreed to the terms each in turn.

Closer and closer they moved to the Ice Shrine, now walking entirely on ice and in an environment completely devoid of plantlife. Soon, they came up on another lake, but this one was considerably large and was in front of their way. There were floating blocks of ice scattered about all over the lake that surrounded a large glacier with a cave entrance and very tall walls spanning the entire perimeter of the icy mass. Up at the top of the entrance of the cave was the ice symbol, visible from all the way across the distance between the Moirai and the glacier. The cave itself was sealed shut by a door that looked to be made of ice.

"That must be where the Ice Shrine is," said Daisy. "And the cave must be the entrance."

"I would hope so," stated Bowser. "I'd hate to meet the person who willingly moved out into an arctic tundra of nothingness to live on an island glacier miles and miles from society in a butt-cold lake sealed up inside walls that you can't even throw a ball over!"

"Looks like we'll need to jump across all these pieces of ice to get there," said Athelstan.

"But we'll need to take care to not fall into this lake," said Warra. "Regardless of the bizarre temperature effects that have resulted from the corruption of ice it's still cold enough for the water to do us harm should we fall in."

"Oh that's just great," Bowser mumbled. "We're frickin' platforming on top of ice plates across a freezing lake bed; this is so cliché."

The fighters each made their way across the floating chunks of ice to get to the glacier deep in the heart of the lake. The door had a spin dial with an indentation in the center in the shape of an improper icosahedron. Grekka took a small piece of ice from the glacier floor and molded it into the shape that would perfectly fit within the three-dimensional keyhole. He then inserted the makeshift key and unlocked the door that revealed the entrance to the cave. After ascending the large flight of stairs within that stretched up about three stories, they passed through the entryway to the other side into what looked to be an abandoned fortress and citadel complex made out of a combination of ice, metal, and stone. Just as was the case outside the shrine, the northern lights illuminated the construct.

The Ice Shrine proved to be just as expansive as all the previous shrines. The hallways were grand and massive, encased by large, seventy-foot tall exterior walls. The shrine was a four-floor, open building with no ceiling, and the amount of walls decreased as the floors moved higher and higher up until the fourth floor where there were barely any walls at all. The shrine seemed to be divided into four distinct quadrants from the second floor all the way through to the fourth floor. The floors were stacked like boxes that decreased in size with each ascension, but the fourth floor actually extended outwards to come close to overlapping the outermost perimeter hallway making up the bottom floor and acting as a square boundary for the entire Ice Shrine. The decreasing walls with each floor were replaced by increasing amounts of bridges – a majority of the third floor being made of bridges, and the wall-less fourth floor essentially just a collection of walkways. It also appeared that the exterior walls of the Shrine extended upwards all the way to just below the fourth floor to guarantee that no one outside the shrine would be able to see inside.

Interestingly enough, the gemstone room was dead ahead in the center of the complex as a colossal eight-way intersection for the entire first floor. The Moirai were able to make out the Ice Gemstone resting in its pedestal. A huge Plexiglas dome covered the entire gemstone interchange.

"This place is like a huge and more sophisticated version of Block

Fort," said Daisy.

"Hah! You remember that place?" replied Bowser.

"What is, 'Block Fort,' exactly?" Warra asked.

"It was this place we had for karting competitions back in Mushroom Kingdom," said the Moirai of Earth.

"How do you guys have the time to be able to do that stuff?!" Athelstan asked in disbelief.

"Can I come along next time?!" Marut begged.

"Let's focus on the mission before we start thinking about 'extracurriculars,' " Bowser remarked.

"When I attempted to take down Kokoro, we fought in the center where the Ice Gemstone is now," said Grekka. "It's about ninety yards in diameter, and the gemstone pedestal is in front of the northern hallway. However, that glass cage was not up when I was here before."

"So all the way over there in the center of this building is where the gemstone is," said Daisy. "That means we don't have to worry about searching it out this time. But the glass cage is an issue, so we're going to have to try and figure out a way to bring down that dome. Marut, can you run up and examine its properties? Just, anything that's notable. We don't need a full-blown essay."

Marut dashed towards the dome to get a close-up look of its makeup and mechanics. As he got up near the dome, he took note that the halls that were aligned diagonally in respect to the quadrants were actually tunnels that dipped underground and came back up as they led to the outermost, square-like hallway surrounding the entire shrine. Upon further inspection, Marut saw that the diagonal hallways gave access to a basement level. He also noticed that there were twenty latches on the ground that appeared to be sealing the dome cage shut – or at the very least acting as locks – meaning that there were switches that had to be reversed in order to gain access to the Ice Gemstone pedestal. He didn't see any stairs or

other means of getting up to the other levels of the building, so that meant that whatever method there was for elevation had to be in the outer boundary hallway. To offset that though, stairs from the second to the third floor and from the third to the fourth floor were positioned towards the interior of the shrine. He took note of the small, circular walkway hugging the perimeter of the dome that gave access to all eight passages on the ground level including the one he was in. Thanks to that feature, the glass dome would not interfere with their ability to cut through the middle of the shrine for quick travel. Feeling like he scouted around and found out all that was needed, Marut dashed back to his teammates.

Chapter XXIII

Underneath the Northern Lights :

"So based on what Marut reported, we have to unlock that dome," said Daisy. "And we'll have to do that by removing those latches. Switches for those must be located throughout the shrine, and I doubt that they'll all be in one place. So for the sake of timing, we'll split up and scout out the switches on each floor. I'll take the second floor."

"I've got the basement," Bowser said.

"I'll take the ground floor here," said Athelstan.

"Marut and I can take the top floor," said Warra.

"Then that leaves the third floor to me," Grekka said.

"HEY!" Marut yelled. "LOOK WHO'S BEHIND US!"

All six Moirai turned around to see Metal Mario standing at the entryway. The ice from earlier was still jammed in its torso and did not appear to have been tinkered with at all since.

"How did it follow us?!" Athelstan shouted. "We got far away enough, didn't we?"

"It must possess some sort of special tracking capabilities," said Grekka. The Moirai of Ice manifested an ice shard and rushed forward to jam it into Metal Mario's head. The shard punctured, but like the two shards from before, had no effect. Metal Mario snapped the end of the ice shard off and attempted to impale Grekka with it, but a well-placed palm strike from the ice wielder deflected and shattered the shard. Marut brought in a gust of wind to push back the metal being, but it retaliated quickly and started making a move towards the Moirai.

"Spread out!" Bowser barked. All of the fighters ran towards the

dome cage in the center of the complex and split up to go to different areas of the ground floor and second floor. Metal Mario took up the pursuit, looking to go after Athelstan. Luckily for them, Metal Mario was painfully slow, being able to only muster up a jog at its fastest pace. Marut, Daisy, Grekka, and Warra had already got up to the second level, Bowser slipped around to the northeast quadrant on the ground level, and Athelstan made a lap around the southwest quadrant of the shrine and stopped alongside the dome. Metal Mario, although slow, did not stop in his chase of the stone wielder.

"Athelstan, why don't you just manipulate it?" Daisy yelled. "It's made of metal!"

"Don't you think I would if I could?" Athelstan yelled back. "It keeps giving me some sort of strange resistance every time I try to focus on it!" Metal Mario turned the corner and chugged its way towards the Moirai of Stone, closing in and readying itself to strike. Athelstan took out his halberd and rammed into the metal figure, catching it within the arch of his halberd blade. With the metal body now ensnared, Athelstan made his way for the door and through the entryway to move back to the outside. The mighty fighter had to force all of his incredible brute strength on Metal Mario as if he were pushing a weighted sled, for the heavy figure was furiously trying to dig its feet into the ground to stop their movement and momentum.

Once back on the outside of the shrine, Athelstan lifted up his halberd and the outrageously dense Metal Mario and slung the metal body out into the water to sink to the bottom of the enormous lake. It was a creepy sight to see a humanoid figure try to apathetically swim its way back up to the surface in silence as it floated all the way down to however low the lakebed was. Athelstan then returned to the inside of the Ice Shrine, somewhat disturbed by the image. Marut, Daisy, Grekka, and Warra moved to the parts of the second floor closest to the dome, and Bowser and Athelstan moved towards them on the ground floor.

"That Metal Mario has been taken care off," Athelstan announced. "It's down at the bottom of the lake now."

"We should try to finish our business here quickly," said Grekka.

"Although the lake this glacier and shrine are on is larger and deeper than the one we traveled past, it's very likely that that metal form will try to reemerge again and pursue us once more."

"I don't see this 'Soul Stealer' dude anywhere," said Marut. "Not even where the Ice Gemstone is."

"It's possible that he may be hiding somewhere around here," said Warra. "Everyone, be on your guard as you look for those switches..."

The Moirai each went to their respective floors to look for and activate all the switches necessary to unlock the dome cage surrounding the Ice Gemstone. Bowser went through the basement, Athelstan handled the ground floor, Daisy took care of the second floor, Grekka scouted the third floor, and Marut and Warra had responsibility over the top floor. The switches were scattered about, though the elemental wielders were able to eventually locate and activate all of them without any outside interference. Upon deactivation of the final latch, the dome began to split apart down the middle and pull into the ground. Soon, the center of the shrine became accessible.

Daisy was the first one to notice that the dome cage had been removed. "Hey! The barrier's gone!" She called out while running to jump down into the eight-way junction. Slowly, her teammates began to come back around to the center of the great complex. Daisy landed at the eastern end of the junction, and Marut expected to join her as he got ready to jump down from the third level but was suddenly cutoff and knocked back by a nimble blur. The blur raced down into the center to confront Daisy. At that time, the rest of the Moirai were rushing towards the eight-way intersection and quickened their pace once they noticed that a potentially hostile figure had appeared before the Moirai of Earth. However, a translucent deep blue electromagnetic force field flared up into the sky around the slots in the ground that the Plexiglas cage had retracted into. Bowser and Athelstan stopped in their tracks in the southern hallway of the ground floor and Grekka and Warra came to rest at the edges of the northeast and southeast quadrants of the second floor respectively.

"Damn it!" Bowser yelled. "It's like there's a wall here now!"

"Who's that freaky guy in front of Daisy?" Marut asked as he got back to his feet and took up position next to Warra.

"That's him," Grekka murmured. "That's Kokoro, the Soul Stealer!"

A horrific being standing six and a half feet tall with a slender yet masculine build stood opposite Daisy. He had smooth, hard scales that were deep brown with a deep and distinct purple shine in place of skin. Although he was dressed in an intricate gold and dark brown form-fitting tunic that covered his entire torso and black-belted gunmetal gray shorts, he had a thin, case-like bone structure that was exposed and slightly protruded along the whole length and circumference of both of his arms, both his legs, and his neck. His fingers were all individual blade-like claws, though his feet must not have been since they were inside of dark brown shoes. His face resembled that of a vampire and his pale periwinkle complexion was a stark contrast from his deeply saturated body. Instead of hair, the skin on his head jutted backwards and out in long and sharp protrusions as if there were bones there as well. The sclera of his large, angled eyes was light blue and held black irises and white pupils, and strapped to his back was an extremely large scroll. Daisy gazed intensely at the demon that stood before her and the wicked smirk on his face.

"...Now I have you..." the demon breathed before turning around to see that Grekka was in attendance. "I'll have dealt with you by the time this night's over; don't you worry," he assured.

Grekka responded to Kokoro with a nervous grimace. Athelstan and Bowser tried in vain to pass through the newly erected force field barrier that was emitting a very low-toned hum.

"Let down this barrier!" Athelstan demanded.

"...No, you stay out there," Kokoro responded. He turning to Daisy to say, "I'm dealing with you..." His voice was as snarky as it was sharply metallic. "Don't bother trying to escape what is now our arena; this force field that I've put up is impervious to attack and will remain in existence as long as I am conscious enough to maintain

my awareness of it. Which means, you must beat me here now if you have any intentions of leaving this place alive."

"That can be arranged," Daisy replied with a fierce stare.

"Fool, I am Kokoro, the Soul Stealer..." the demon snapped. "I can tell that you are ignorant of my identity, so allow me to enlighten you."

"Oh boy," Daisy said in sarcastic joy.

"I steal the souls of sentient life and seal them into this-" he said, pulling the scroll over his back and in front of him to show the Moirai of Earth. "The Scroll of Souls. As souls are added to the scroll, their names are inscribed in fine characters on the paper. As you can see, this scroll is plenty thick, and I have plenty more space remaining."

"And for what purpose are you collecting souls?" Daisy asked.

"My reasons are mine and mine alone," the Soul Stealer said. "Although I will say that I do enjoy the thrill of hearing screams of agony and terror as my victims are stripped of both their souls...and their lives."

"So you're looking to take mine, is that right?" Daisy asked, cocking a smile.

"Yes, I've been keeping tabs on you..." Kokoro replied. "Your vibrant soul will be a prized addition to my collection."

"So why are you here in the Ice Shrine then?" the Moirai of Earth asked.

"I was recruited by Elkon in exchange for the ownership of the souls who trespassed within this shrine," said Kokoro. "I got to play clean-up for all the souls foolish enough to try and make their way here... But after none came here, I got restless...and, impatient...so I decided to take hold of all of the souls of the Northernmost West. I typically don't take the souls of the weak, but I had to make an exception in this case to feed my hunger for mass paranoia and horror."

"Yes, Grekka topped us off to that," Daisy muttered in distaste.

Kokoro started laughing. "Of course, Elkon also enticed me with the possibility that I may encounter souls with exceptional might who might try to purify this shrine, so I had to take him up on his offer. How fate has shined upon me with your presence here."

"How's that?" Daisy asked.

"You can say that I'm a collector of sorts," Kokoro began. "I've traveled across many a land, collecting the souls of some of the most formidable fighters. Sarasaland was one of the areas I had visited ten years ago. Needless to say, your father had made Sarasaland pretty infamous, but my business was not with him. I came to the kingdom looking for a handful of their best fighters to attain possession of their souls, including the elite earth master, Terran."

Daisy frowned and raised her head. "What..."

"However, when I went to strip Terran of his soul, I saw that you were there with him," the Soul Stealer continued. "I sensed that you had a latent power you had not yet developed. It was an immense buildup of energy with the potential to surpass that of your master's if you were given the opportunity to access it and learn how to use it. So I left Sarasaland in pursuit of other souls and came back six years later, expecting that you would have developed your power by then so that I may take both of your souls. Unfortunately, both you and Terran were gone. I could not find either of you anywhere within Sarasaland. I set off to hunt him down, expecting to find you with him. Needless to say, I was displeased to see that you were not, but it turned out alright because at least I was able to secure Terran's soul in the process."

Daisy's eyes narrowed as she started growling, the knowledge that her former master that she had not seen in ten years had fallen to Kokoro infuriating her. Energy began rumbling and crackling around her fists, ready to leap out at a moment's notice.

"Oh, you didn't like that part did you?" Kokoro taunted. "Well don't worry. Once I take your soul, you'll be able to join him in my Scroll of

Souls for eternity." He began incessantly snickering, further angering Daisy. "Hopefully you won't plead for mercy like Terran did-"

Kokoro took a Smash Punch to the face that momentarily knocked him senseless and caused the Scroll of Souls to go flying off to the side. The airborne Daisy put her feet back on the ground with a bitterly incensed expression on her face. The Soul Stealer had no time to react to her blazing speed, but regained his bearings and eyed down his opponent with intrigue. Daisy stood balefully glaring at her master's killer, looking ready to snap his neck the moment he tried to make a move.

"Very good," Kokoro muttered. "It's as I thought. You've made progressions..."

The Moirai of Earth did not utter a word. She maintained her fierce and irate stare.

Kokoro chuckled in a low and devious tone before saying, "I'm going to enjoy this."

Daisy snarled and charged forward again, but this time, Kokoro was prepared and sidestepped her bull rush to counter with a high-angled kick that slammed her directly into the ground. Kokoro then attempted to dig his claws into her back, but Daisy managed to roll out of the way and backflip to another side of the field.

"This is not good," Warra murmured. "Daisy has to fight Kokoro now and she still hasn't even recovered from the fight against Vodyanoy."

"She can pull through!" Athelstan asserted.

"She'll have to pull through!" Bowser added. "All we can do is watch..."

"Wait a minute," Marut said. "If this is an electromagnetic force field that's up, then that means that Kokoro must be a light wielder!"

"Yes," Grekka confirmed. "A quite proficient one at that. More than proficient to be brutally honest. He is able to manipulate light in an array of lethal ways. On top of that, he is also a competent

spellcaster. Fighting him requires the fullest of attention, or else you'll pay the price..."

Kokoro stood across from Daisy, a sickening grin on his face matching his piercing, unblinking eyes . The Moirai of Earth quickly peered to the left and right, then returned her gaze to her opponent. *This environment is nothing but ice and stone,* she said in her mind. *The earth is virtually non-existent in this icy place . I don't think this guy is going to give me the necessary time or allow me to waste the necessary amount of energy to create any, and there's not any respectable amount of earth trapped within a glacier anyways. Which means I'm limited to hand-to-hand for the most part. I can still always use the earth's seismic energy, but I could easily put too much force into it if I'm not careful and this whole building could collapse. I'll have to limit that as well then.* "Damn..." she then muttered aloud in surliness.

"It's too bad Terran was as delusional as he was easy to overpower," Kokoro suddenly said.

"What," Daisy gasped in disgust.

"Yes," Kokoro whispered. "It was a truly disappointing curbstomp. But then again, he never saw me coming..."

Daisy snarled. "I can't believe a damn thing you emit from your mouth after hearing you disparage my master the way you have!"

"Okay, maybe he didn't plead for his life," Kokoro admitted. "But he may as well have. It's pretty hard for someone to fight back when they took a surprise critical hit to the back of their neck without even realizing it... Just one hit brought him to the ground, and everything afterwards...an amateur elemental wielder in grade school could have handled. He looked so pitiable, I *almost* felt regret for extinguishing his life... Then again, who would want to live with a broken neck?"

"Underhanded bastard," Daisy quickly snapped. "There's no honor in cheap tactics like that! If you don't have the respect and courage to challenge someone face to face, then you shouldn't even be fighting at all, let alone using your elemental abilities for no other

purpose than committing countless murders to steal souls."

"Fool, I'm all about the score," the Soul Stealer replied. "And the only score that matters to me is the score inscribed on my scroll."

Daisy's expression further intensified with tension and angst. The energy in her hands crackled with fury.

"You have some nerve talking about such childish things," Kokoro said. "Don't try to force your ill-informed and pathetic excuse for wisdom upon me. But who am I to stop you from trying anyways – obviously, you learned from the best! Terran said the same things you're saying and look what happened to him; he's now bound to the Scroll of Souls for all eternity!"

Daisy's energy bolstered inside of her as a result of Kokoro's constant pushing. The Soul Stealer became increasingly content with Daisy's show of frustration and did not let up on his verbal onslaught. The rest of the Moirai looked on through the force field with bated breath.

"Yes, he gave me a spiel very similar to the one you just gave me," Kokoro hissed. "Your pathetic master preached nothing but honor and respect, but he was too ignorant and stubborn to realize that we're in a world where no such things exist... He got what was coming to him-"

"Just shut the hell up already!" Daisy yelled, already charging energy in the stance for her Seismic Wave.

"You don't honestly believe that your late master's values actually have real world applications, do you?" the Soul Stealer asked. "Anybody can simply say things...but empty words only serve the purpose of wasting one's breath."

"I don't wanna hear it!" Daisy growled, her raspy voice becoming increasingly aggravated.

"Such innocent trifles are impossible," Kokoro pressed. "Believing them will only set you up to be nothing more than cannon fodder to be taken advantage of by those who know how to take what they

want from this world in whatever way is necessary. The true key to success and power in this world is realizing that the cost does not matter as long as you're not the one that has to spend. People thrive only by taking advantage of all those weaker and below them. Terran's ideals were and have been outdated mannerisms that hold no bearing on reality. Your father understood this..." He paused for a second before finishing with a lowered tone, "So why can't you..."

"What did I just get through saying?" Daisy yelled in ever mounting rage. "JUST SHUT THE HELL UP!" Both hands came forward as an unrelenting wave of seismic energy shattered the air it traveled through on its way to the Soul Stealer. "I DON'T WANNA HEAR IT!" she screamed with feral eyes as Kokoro took the blast head on. He attempted to block it but was not ready for the immense amount of energy that proceeded to pummel his shielding arms. The crippling forces imposed their will through his crossed arms and forced him backwards up against the force field. Fortunately, the electromagnetic force field around them kept the seismic energy from spreading out to the rest of the Ice Shrine and actually *amplified* its potency due to the enclosed space. By the end of the blast, however, Kokoro still stood. Aside from the jarring pain and damage done to both the exterior and interior of his arms, Kokoro stared at the Moirai of Earth with intrigue regarding the blast. Daisy's fury had not settled at all as she stood heavily leaning forward and ready to pounce.

You derive your power from your emotions, Kokoro thought. *The more you feel, the more powerful you become.* He snickered to himself with content. *So this is what I've been waiting for all this time...*

"What's so funny?" Daisy barked.

"Nothing," said Kokoro. "I'm just musing about how satisfying it will be to have possession over your soul."

"I wouldn't be laughing if I were you," the Moirai of Earth responded.

"Oh really?" the Soul Stealer asked.

"I see how you work," Daisy gruffly said. "You claim to possess the

souls of some of the mightiest fighters and warriors on the planet, but that's why you're known as the Soul *Stealer* . You sneak up on unsuspecting people and strip them of their souls by any means necessary. You don't care how you do it, you just take! Is that why you *really* didn't want to confront Terran when you had the chance ten years ago? Because you knew that I was there with him and that it would be two against one if you made the decision to attack? Because if you tried to take his soul, you would've had to deal with us both? Because you didn't have the confidence or respect to confront the both of us face to face?"

"Tough talk," Kokoro muttered. "But you can't comprehend the depths of my power."

Daisy did not back down, only becoming more angered and driven as time went on. "Then if you really want to prove to me how formidable you truly are, you'll fight out this battle with honor and without the treacherous tactics of a coward... Or I will tear down your pitiful menacing masquerade from its ceiling right to its foundation! You have no place to hide here! This arena is completely flat!"

Kokoro grumbled and grunted in vexation and indignation. His attempts at breaking her through speech were failing, and the upper hand he thought he possessed had rapidly faded away.

"So in this fight, we'll find out how powerful you really are..." Daisy calmly proclaimed. "And how much of your power has been exaggerated."

"Why you little..." Kokoro griped. "I should slit your throat for your lack of awareness of your own speech."

"I'm waiting," Daisy harshly replied, confident in her readiness for whatever Kokoro would throw her way.

"Woah...intense..." Marut said in awe.

"Is this true, Grekka?" Warra asked. "How powerful is Kokoro really?"

"He did attempt to sneak up on me when I came here the first time,"

said Grekka. "I caught him and saved myself from what would've been a lethal attack, but in a head-to-head battle, he still was too much for me to handle. If Daisy has any hopes of getting out of here alive, she has to be absolutely *perfect* with her fighting style. And even then, there's still only a slim chance for victory."

"She'll do it," Athelstan assured. Bowser nodded in agreement with the Moirai of Stone.

"Come on..." Warra anxiously mumbled at the force field.

"You just made the worst mistake you could've made in your entire life," Kokoro boasted, conjuring a row of five thick arrows of light in front of him. "I was going to be generous and kill you right away, but now I see that your death must be dragged out until you are physically unable to feel pain." The light arrows gleamed and glistened as he fired them off at the Moirai of Earth. She swiftly dropped to the floor to avoid getting punctured by the projectiles that ended up hitting the force field and getting absorbed into the barrier. Kokoro created five more arrows and shot them off, forcing Daisy to take to the air in a double front flip to ensure her evasion.

Unfortunately, Kokoro had fired off a third round of light arrows before Daisy touched back onto the ground. Upon landing, Daisy crossed and threw up her arms to prevent the arrows from piercing her torso. A quick concentration of seismic energy around her arms dispersed a lot of the light arrow's power and reduced the effectiveness of the attack. As a result, Daisy only received blunt trauma from the attack instead of being stabbed by the penetrating light. When she lowered her arms, she saw that a fourth wave of arrows was coming her way. To make sure she didn't get hit again, she jumped and twisted her body around so that she was parallel to the floor while the arrows zipped by underneath her. Anticipating a fifth row of arrows on the way, she tumbled and rolled ten yards to her left. Her hindsight paid off, and with his fifth row of arrows, Kokoro once again missed.

"I may be a small target, but this is sad," Daisy mocked.

"I WILL break you!" a thoroughly irritated Kokoro declared. "I don't care how, but you will be broken – I can assure you that!" With one

hand extended in front of him, he created a rapidly spinning disk of light three shoulder-widths wide and aimed it at Daisy. Once the disk was released, it continuously flipped in counterclockwise motion as it traveled through the air. Daisy cut to her right to avoid the erratic disk and dashed towards the Soul Stealer.

She wanted to be able to strike at breakneck speed with her Crystal Kick, but the lack of earth in the environment prevented her from being able to do the move. She instead front flipped into the air once she was close enough to Kokoro and came out of the maneuver with an ax kick. Her foot however, was blocked high above the Soul Stealer's head, his arms shielding him. She immediately took advantage of the block by pushing off his arms with her attacking foot into another front flip that propelled her forward and just behind the archfiend. Kokoro responded by whipping around to throw a hook with his right hand, but Daisy somehow caught the incoming fist in her left hand before she even fully turned around. She threw his fist down and came forward with a Flurry Punch to pummel him in a wave of successive, motion-blurred jabs. Daisy's eyes flashed as she finished her offense with a vicious elbow thrust from her other arm into Kokoro's diaphragm, expelling all the air from his lungs and knocking him towards the center of the arena.

Daisy darted towards Kokoro as he returned to his feet and attempted to slide tackle him while he was still low to the ground, yet Kokoro managed to release a wall of light that batted her away before she could continue her assault. As Daisy skidded to a halt, the air around her began to glow. She looked around and could not determine the origin of the strange glow until she glanced down and saw that a large octagram of light sixteen feet in diameter had appeared on the ground directly beneath her. Sensing that the octagram was charged with energy, she made a swift dive to her left just out of the reach of one of the points of the shape and just in time to escape getting hit by the intense wall of light that subsequently emerged from the eight-pointed star. The light extended high up into the sky before fading out.

Kokoro rushed forward with blistering speed to plant a fast hooking kick into the side of Daisy's waist while she stared at his awe-inspiring octagram technique. She stumbled sideways two steps,

then regained her balance and gave a jumping spin kick back to Kokoro in his shoulder to return the favor. Although the kick appeared to harm the Soul Stealer, Daisy could not stick her feet back on the ground fast enough to block the retaliatory quick jab that Kokoro threw out to get her to back off.

She took the hit, but she took it surprisingly hard and let out a hoarse scream as she stumbled several steps backwards. The Moirai watched the development unfold, each with varying degrees of shock. Not even Kokoro was expecting the sudden display of fragility from Daisy, who was now wincing and panting from the minor attack.

What was that ... the archfiend thought to itself. *All throughout the battle, she has been holding up fine, but I throw a comparatively weak attack that makes contact across the upper left portion of her chest, and all of a sudden, she cracks.*

Daisy stood, still uncomfortable and in pain from the previous attack. Her discomfort distracted her and prevented her eyes from keeping up with Kokoro, who zipped right up to her, already in position to attack again. He keyed in on the same area that his last jab hit and punched her with a great deal more force, eliciting a more pronounced version of the previous result. Kokoro began softly laughing at the now reeling earth wielder.

"What do we have here..." said Kokoro, barely audible. "Not so mighty now...are you..."

Daisy did not respond, and was instead moaning in tormenting pain.

"...What's... What's going on?" Marut asked. Bowser, Athelstan, and Warra said nothing in response, only able to stare at the unraveling situation occurring within the confines of the force field.

Daisy tried to shrug it off as she returned to her stance to get back on the offensive, but Kokoro had already caught sight of all he needed to see. He made the first move before Daisy could strike first, sending a sphere of light at the Moirai of Earth. She made a high backflip to avoid the sphere, but Kokoro was already charging forward wickedly fast and leading with his elbow. Daisy could not

react and took the elbow in the same area she took the previous two hits. She was sent tumbling along the ground, and let loose a painful howl once she came to a stop.

"Hey! Daisy!" Athelstan yelled. "What's wrong?! Why aren't you fighting back now?!"

"I don't understand..." Warra mumbled, dumbstruck by the sudden change in events.

"...It's over," Grekka murmured.

Heavily grunting and shaking, Daisy got back to her feet looking like she had just endured a hit from a speeding bus. She assumed her stance and tried in vain to appear as if nothing had happened. Kokoro saw right through it and displayed a content and prideful expression that looked nightmarishly sadistic at the same time. The fight now seemed to be solely under his control.

"I said I would break you," Kokoro bitterly murmured. "And that's precisely what I intend to do."

Chapter XXIV

Memories of a Forlorn Soul :

"I don't want to be a princess. I want to be a world-class athlete!" Daisy yelled at her mother. "I want to be the strongest girl out there! And the fastest too! I'll even be an Olympic champion one day!"

"Oh please, get those childish visions out of your head; you're twelve years old now!" Queen Sarasa scorned, looking anxious and disgruntled as the two argued in Daisy's room. Master Terran stood beside the queen, visibly upset with what was transpiring. "It's time for you to wake up to reality, and the fact of the matter is you have political roles you need to attend to!" the queen continued. "You're not going to inherit this kingdom if you keep playing petty little games! I don't want to hear another word on that matter!"

"But-"

"Not another word!" the queen boomed. "You could never be an athlete of that level even if you wanted to. You don't have what it takes! You'll never be strong enough, fast enough or powerful enough!"

"I can't take it anymore!" Daisy exploded. "You never let me play on any of the sports teams, you never let me have any friends, and...you never even pay me any worthwhile attention unless it involves the kingdom in some way..."

"Listen to me, you ungrateful brat," the queen said. "Forget those fantasies and wake up to the real world! You are here for one reason and that is to keep the family name as the ruling body over Sarasaland! That is your father's command, and his word is law! You have no time for such piddling pleasantries."

Daisy's bowed face showed indignation and dejection as tears began streaming out the sides of her eyes. Defeated, she uttered no further response.

"As for you," the queen said, turning to Terran. "You have one week to leave this kingdom! If you do not leave within that time frame, I'll see to it that the king will have you executed!"

"What? Why?" Terran asked in surprise.

"Why do you think?" Queen Sarasa snapped. "You were supposed to teach my daughter self-defense! Not fill her head with silly little unrealistic ideas and turn her into a rebellious thug!"

Terran frantically waved his hands. "With all due respect, I didn't do anything to her mind or judgment, nor have I done anything to change her being. I was allowing Daisy to express herself and her true character! You see, you keep her so limited and restricted all the time, and Daisy really seems to blossom when-"

"You better watch your mouth; the king could have you killed right now if he wanted to," the queen barked before turning her attention back to Daisy. "Daisy, I forbid you to train with this man! It is simply not lady-like for you to be as involved with him as you are, and you have responsibilities as Princess of Sarasaland!"

Daisy had heard enough. Growing more angry and upset with each phrase uttered by the queen, she got up and dashed in between Terran and her mother to get out into the halls.

"You know, I really don't appreciate your treatment of your own child," said Terran. "It's very disrespectful, and it seems to me like both you and the king don't value your daughter the way you're supposed to. You should be careful-"

"Get out of this castle!" the queen ordered, now fuming. "You and your disobedience are not welcome here anymore! Don't you dare tell me what to do with my child! Get out or I'll have you killed on the spot at this very moment!"

"...As you wish, Queen," Terran said, closing his eyes. He turned to make his way down the hall in the opposite direction of Daisy for the exit. Queen Sarasa then left to chase after her daughter.

Crying as she ran through the spacious and echoing halls, Daisy

made an impulsive decision right then and there that was the result of the culmination of all that she had to endure throughout her life. She sprinted to the palace armory, reached for the sharpest combat knife she could come across, and thrust it into the upper portion of her chest as deep as she could. Her stab was offset slightly to her left to avoid her sternum, but she didn't use enough force. The penetration was too shallow and just too high up to elicit the effect she had aimed for. Her mother ran into the armory in time to see Daisy on her knees with her left hand on the knife handle and her right hand clenched into a fist that was creating as much tension as possible to distract her from the pain.

The queen screamed at the sight. "Daisy! WHY?!"

Daisy did not even turn her weak eyes. She was noticeably panting and shaking with tears running down her face but was otherwise silent. Hearing her mother's voice again struck a chord within her that managed to push her further into despair. She grabbed the knife with both hands and began to try and force it deeper within herself, but the inhibitory response from the body was too much to overcome and her natural affinity to earth had made her whole body noticeably tougher to penetrate. Thus, the blade was mostly limited to making a flesh wound. The tears from her eyes streamed faster once she realized that the knife failed to complete its task, and in a matter of seconds, she fell forward on her side with the knife still stuck in her chest and passed out.

After ten years, the indented, distorted star-shaped scar has never fully healed, remaining several shades darker than the surrounding skin. Nobody was ever aware of its existence except for Daisy herself, and nobody was aware that the scar was several times more sensitive than anywhere else on her body. As for why it never fully healed, she never knew. But she did know that Kokoro had become aware that she essentially had a weak spot, and that judging by the kind of person Kokoro was, he would do everything he could to exploit it. *Which means I need to attack and stay on the offensive so that he doesn't get a chance to* , she thought.

She made a slight squat and propelled herself forward at the Soul

Stealer, then swiftly cut to the side and rolled along the ground to get behind him so she could grab hold of his arm. She then twisted her body around to toss him into the air, then juggled him with her Flurry Punch. After a couple seconds, she cut off her continuous attack and put out a bicycle kick to knock back Kokoro a dozen yards through the air. Daisy rushed at him to followup her chain of attacks with a Smash Punch from her left hand once Kokoro regained his control and put his feet back on the ground, but the archfiend slipped just out of the way and swiped his claw to slash her in the side of her non-leading arm. The Moirai of Earth was forced to momentarily back off, but Kokoro would allow no such thing. As Daisy was leaping backwards, the Soul Stealer came at her in pursuit and landed a punch where her scar was. In an instant, she flopped backwards in agony and landed face-up on the ground. Daisy's teammates watched in shock as Kokoro walked up to the downed fighter and began repeatedly stomping his foot into the upper left portion of her chest. With each hit, Daisy forced out a spirit-crushing grunt of pain.

"What's going on?" Warra asked. "Why the sudden change? Daisy was holding up quite well until now!"

"The only thing I can think of is that there must be some sort of weak spot that Kokoro discovered," Bowser grimly replied.

"What..." Warra mumbled. "Why didn't anybody say anything about a weak spot?"

"Nobody knew," said Bowser. Marut, Athelstan, and Grekka could contribute nothing to the conversation. Their eyes were locked on Kokoro, who stomped without ceasing. Every two seconds, Daisy could be heard letting out a grating scream of agony.

Kokoro began laughing as he continued stomping. "I told you I would drag this out until you are unable to register the sensation of pain. So prepare to be taken to within an inch of life."

"Alright, no more!" Bowser howled, charging and firing off a fully charged Tavado blast at the force field. The flame blast created a large explosion, but could not produce any effect on the integrity of the barrier.

Kokoro stopped and directed his attention towards the failed attempt to bring down his force field with a sadistic grin plastered on his face. "Don't worry; everyone gets a turn," he told the elemental wielders.

Bowser grimaced in anxious anger, upset that his attack failed. He quickly charged and fired a beam of plasma out of his hands, but that too failed to elicit any sort of damage to the barrier. Grekka got an idea and began concentrating his ice energy while gathering several small chunks of ice into a sphere. Then, by awakening and reversing the dormant polarity of the ice, he was able to turn the frozen ball into a strong magnet, thereby creating the advanced form of ice. With the magnetic ice now humming in his hands, Grekka shot off the freezing mass at the force field to try and rip the barrier apart with magnetic forces. The chunk of ice shattered upon impact with the force field, releasing its magnetic charge. The force field became distorted at the point of contact but did not sustain any sort of noticeable damage.

Marut created a mass amount of friction in the air around him to generate bolts of lightning in his hands and let them fly at the point of distortion on the barrier. Finally, the light barrier appeared to experience at least some breakage from all the hits. All the while, Kokoro watched with no sign of worry. He sent more energy into the barrier and its point of damage to reinforce its strength to make sure that he wouldn't be interfered with. If anything, at least the uproar was giving Daisy a break.

"I'm in a league above all of you," said Kokoro. "So don't get impatient. Rest assured, I'll take care of each of you one-by-one, starting with the one in the white clothing."

Grekka cringed in response to the Soul Stealer's gesture to him.

Kokoro let out an audible exhale. "And if any of you try to run, I *will* hunt you down and ensure that your penalty will be at the minimum as steep as that of your friend here." He brought his foot up with extra height and slammed it down onto Daisy's scar with twice as much force as his previous stomps, prompting a horrifying yelp from the Moirai of Earth. "Honestly," he said to the uncontrollably trembling fighter. "I don't know why it is that you're so sensitive to

this area over your heart, but I'm definitely not complaining." He brought his foot up once more and brought it down with even more force than the last time, but somehow, Daisy caught his foot in her hands just before it could make contact again.

"What?!" Kokoro gasped.

With a wild and feral expression on her face, Daisy extended her arms to press Kokoro's foot off her and back up into the air. Exhibiting tremendous effort, she forced back Kokoro and then pushed off the ground with her arms to return to her feet. The Soul Stealer stumbled back two steps and was swiftly dealt a hefty uppercut at the point where his jaw and chin met his neck. The attack pushed him back even further, but he remained on his feet, more annoyed than in pain. Daisy was back to standing, although still wincing and panting from the wave of pain that she just experienced.

"Alright!" Marut cheered.

"Now that's more like it," said Athelstan.

"Well, maybe I've misjudged you," Kokoro grungily spat out. "It seems you've got a lot more nerve than I gave you credit for."

Daisy grimaced and shook in place as much out of pain as she did out of anger. She said nothing to him, her body lanuguage speaking for itself.

"I do hope you plan on continuing," Kokoro coaxed. "Only your endurance is capable of handling what I have in store for you..."

"I'm coming with you!" Daisy yelled. It was the middle of the night when she showed up at the door of Master Terran's house.

"You can't, Daisy," Terran refused. "I was ordered to leave, not you-"

"Please master, why can't I just run away with you?" Daisy urged. "I don't want to be here! And you said that I would have to leave here at some point *and* you said that you'd come with me! We gotta go

now!"

"What? We can't just leave now!" said Terran. "I wasn't going to leave until in the morning; it's the middle of the night and-"

"I snuck out of the castle and was seen by security!" Daisy confessed. "They're after me!"

Terran paused. "Daisy..."

The young girl looked at him with pleading, longing eyes. It didn't take long for the earth master to make his decision.

"Let's go," said Terran. He quickly got his bag and the two earth wielders fled under the veil of the darkness as they heard sirens through the rhythmic sound of their feet making contact with the ground. Through the night, they both ran down the streets of the kingdom and slipped past the outer wall to head out into the open field. A group of soldiers and guards had been following them and kept up pace for pace.

"They're behind us!" said Daisy. "We have to move!"

"They must've caught sight of us at a point further back!" Terran said, quickening his pace.

"Bring back my daughter this instant!" King Sarasa boomed through the trees.

"Great, he's with them too," Daisy muttered. "We gotta go faster!"

"We'll cut off into the trees," said Terran.

The master and student took a path that led into the woods, hoping to lose their pursuers. Unfortunately for them, the diversion didn't fool anyone. King Sarasa and his troops continued tracking Daisy and Terran down. A little ways deeper into the woods, a shot from an Ice Rifle clipped Terran in the leg, causing him to stumble and slow down a bit.

"Kill the man!" the king ordered.

Daisy heard the command and made a split-second decision to make sure that Terran could get to safety. "Master, please just go on ahead and leave without me," she asserted. "I'll distract them. At least you'll be able to get away."

Terran's turned his head in surprise. "But Daisy-"

"Terran, just go!" she demanded. "

The two shared one final look before Terran sped up and darted ahead. The young Daisy stopped in her tracks and turned around to wait for the squadron of soldiers that had been following her. It didn't take more than twenty seconds for the group headed by Sarasaland's namesake King and Queen both to come to a stop in front of her.

"Shoot the fleeing traitor!" King Sarasa ordered one of his soldiers. The soldier put up his Ice Rifle and took aim at the escaping figure off in the distance. Just before he could pull the trigger, Daisy jumped up and knocked the rifle from his hands with her fist and then ripped a chunk of earth from the ground to hurl at a group of soldiers that were huddled close together, giving Terran the opportunity to get away and out of sight.

"Your father will deal with you for your insubordination!" Queen Sarasa exclaimed, red in the face.

"What do you think you're doing sneaking off in the middle of the night and beyond Sarasaland boundaries?" the king asked his daughter.

"Getting away from you!" Daisy growled as she jumped at King Sarasa, an energy fist charged and ready to strike. The king sidestepped out of the way of the fist that lit up the night and gave a massive kick right into Daisy's abdomen, knocking her back twenty feet along the ground. The King marched towards his daughter, who lay motionless upon the ground. He picked her up by her hair until she was hanging in midair.

"This is what you get for defying me, you incompetent little brat," the King said. "You do as *I* TELL YOU TO!" He grabbed her by the

throat and slammed her into the ground, sending debris into the air. Her mother just stood by and watched without comment, movement, or expression. The soldiers did the same. *I didn't raise you to be a problem child, Daisy,* Queen Sarasa thought.

Daisy lay there half-conscious in agony. Her father stood tall with anger all throughout his expression. "You try defying my word again and see what happens," her father said. "Now get up."

Daisy tried to get up, quietly crying in physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional pain. She could not return to her feet, and fell back to the ground.

"You're worthless... I said GET-" the king began yelling as he grabbed her once again and threw her high up into the air. "UP!" he finished after thrusting his knee into the falling body of his daughter. Daisy coughed up a burst of blood and went limp from the force of her father's knee. He picked her up by the shirt, but he felt no need to do any more.

"You're not going anywhere! You *are* going to take control of this kingdom," the king snarled with arrogance. "Maybe next time, you'll think before you act."

The Moirai all stared inside the barrier, anxiously waiting for what would happen next between Daisy and the Soul Stealer. With every passing moment, Daisy looked more and more deflated.

"It does my heart good to see you writhing in pain," Kokoro thought aloud, speaking at a menacingly slow pace. "I got so caught up in collecting souls that I had forgotten what a thrill it is..." he raised his hand up with his index and middle claw extended and pointed towards Daisy. "...To wring out every last drop of life from a body..." He fired a concentrated bullet of light at the area where Daisy's scar was, furthering her agonizing torment. "...And work the gradient to turn said body into a cadaver..." He fired another bullet at Daisy in the same spot, subsequently creating more audible suffering.

Kokoro continued to fire off light bullets at the Moirai of Earth that

kept hitting her in her scar and kept pushing her back, only to give way to more bullets in a vicious cycle. The Soul Stealer did it all while chuckling to himself with the most heinous smirk he had displayed so far. Bowser blasted more plasma at the force field, followed by more lightning from Marut and more magnetics from Grekka. Warra joined in and fired off sonics at the barrier, and to overcome the meager amount of stone in the immediate vicinity, Athelstan raised his arms and used all the energy he had to materialize a massive mound of rock overhead that he promptly converted into metal to hurl at the force field. For a split second, it appeared as if the combined efforts of the Moirai of Fire, Air, Ice, Water, and Stone had busted through the barrier. But just as the barrier was finally starting to shatter, Kokoro stopped firing off his light bullets at Daisy and sent even more energy up through the force field to fortify it with a layer of light that had even greater resilience. Bowser, Marut, Grekka, Warra, and Athelstan all had just about exhausted their reserves of energy through their liberal use of the advanced element forms.

"How much power does he have?" Warra asked in disbelief.

"I knew he was very formidable, but this just about passes the ceiling that I understood he had," Grekka muttered.

"What if he's drawing power from the Scroll of Souls?" Bowser asked.

"You'd like that wouldn't you?" Kokoro taunted through the force field. "You'd like to believe that I couldn't possibly carry so much power in my body on my own, but I'm afraid that's wishful thinking. The souls are merely my collection. All the energy that I have utilized here has been my own, and Elkon has even more power than I. You see, it's just as I had said earlier; the true keys to power in this world are realizing that the cost does not matter as long as others must pay the price and that the only way to thrive is by taking advantage of others in any way that's necessary. I got as powerful as I am through those very keys... By the way, thank you for making my job easier by exhausting yourselves trying to bust through that force field. Like I said before, the force field remains up as long as I maintain consciousness, so the only way for it to go down is for your friend in here to beat me. Otherwise, even when you do manage to

break it, I can reinforce it and return it to its full strength and beyond. But judging by the condition of your friend in here, this force field will remain up until I dispel it; and I'm not dispelling it until I have finished her off."

None of the Moirai could say or do anything except prepare for the seemingly inevitable worst. Daisy stood, slumped over and knock-kneed, only partially conscious, her breathing audible and heavy. Her hair shadowed her eyes and expression.

"You want me to show honor and respect?" Kokoro groused at the Moirai of Earth. "How do you expect me to do something like that? I don't respect you in the least, especially not now – How can I respect you when you're hunched over and leaning ever closer to death?"

Daisy heard Kokoro even as her mind drifted to her fight against Vodyanoy in the Water Shrine, remembering Warra criticizing her for demonstrating excessive pride in not letting him take over against the aquatic demon. *This is not about pride; it's never been about pride,* she thought. *None of it has ever been. You don't have to respect me, Kokoro; you have to respect your opponent. I don't care whether you respect me personally or not, nor do I care what your opinion of me is, because quite frankly, I never gave a damn about myself in the first place. Hell, I almost killed myself when I was twelve, an age where people are more often than not self-preserving.*

Kokoro dashed at Daisy with a powerful hook that made contact on her scar. Her scream was faint, quickly losing vitality.

It's all a matter of self-worth , she said in her mind as she staggered several steps backward. *If I couldn't beat Vodyanoy, then what does that mean? What does that say about me? Am I not as good as I thought I was? Master, did you overestimate me? What if it was all...just an illusion? If that's the case, then what hope do I have of beating Elkon? Who's to say I can even get past Kokoro?*

The Soul Stealer jumped up and brutally kneed Daisy in her scar, yet she remained on her feet. There was so much pain running through her that it transcended her nervous system and turned her

whole body numb.

Were my parents right?... I don't have what it takes...do I?

Kokoro threw another punch at her scar and immediately followed the attack up with a quick light blast at the same area. Daisy could not even react to the overwhelming pain, and just took the hit with no other sound than the rapid expulsion of air from her lungs.

So I am worthless...

Another heavy punch landed on Daisy where she had shown to be the most vulnerable.

All this time I tried to do everything to prove otherwise... I tried... I really did...

Yet another forceful punch made contact with Daisy.

It was all for not...

Kokoro thrust his elbow at Daisy with blistering speed, making his hit as unforgiving as he could make it.

I had all this confidence in nothing... I should've killed myself when I had the chance...

She staggered backwards a dozen steps before managing to stop herself. Kokoro stood, perplexed at the resiliency that his adversary possessed. Curious about what Daisy could possibly muster up the will to do, he backed off and leapt backwards a couple dozen yards.

No, I will not allow myself to bring about my own demise. If I must die, it must be in a duel against a worthy enemy. I must know full-heartedly that that will be my last experience. Only then, may I finally, truly, be able to pull out all of my power at once – when there is nothing left to do...

Daisy, now barely-awake, let all her remaining energy flow outwards and radiate in the silvery glow indicative of earth wielders. Kokoro stared at his opponent with intrigue, surprised that after all that had happened in their fight, she still had as much energy left as she did.

Daisy put her left hand overhead and shifted her focus to her open palm. *I have to live up to the noble black and silver of earth wielders* , she thought. *If I can't complete this move with my remaining energy, I don't deserve to wear these colors or the earth symbol.* She concentrated and focused the matter around her to materialize a mound of earthly material. As was the case with the five matter-based elements, materializing the element in an environment devoid of the element itself uses up a vast majority of the wielder's energy. With what she had left in her, she molded the earth around her elevated hand and converted it into crystal. She stood tall as she brought her arm down and out to the side.

"After all that...you're still standing..." the Soul Stealer said in amazement. "But even if you succeed with this attack of yours, the only possible outcome will be that you will lose."

Maintaining the intense expression that she had carried throughout the destined mission, Daisy responded to Kokoro for the first time in a while, saying, "I know."

Kokoro stomped his right foot into the ground, creating a bulge of light energy around his lower leg upon contact. "It's too bad you're wearing all-black," he murmured. "We don't get to see the bloody mess that you've made of yourself..."

Daisy gave no verbal response, but got in position with her right hand touching the ground and her crystal fist up and out at forehead level, ready to strike.

"This next exchange..." Kokoro began. "...Will be your last..."

"Daisy..." Warra mumbled, his eyes tearing up.

"You better find some way to get out of this alive," Bowser urged with shallow breath. The others looked on, unable to avert their gaze away from the scene inside the force field.

The next sequence of events seemed to happen in total silence. Daisy sprang forward first, pulling her Crystal Fist all the way back as far as she could go to be able to swing with as much force as she could manage. Kokoro rushed forward with his light energy charged

around his leg. The Moirai of Earth and the Soul Stealer converged on each other towards the center of the arena, the eyes of the earth wielder fiercely locked on her enemy with the intention of doing as much damage to him as she possibly could.

She never made it. Right when they were within striking distance of each other, Kokoro's reach both prevented Daisy from landing her punch and allowed the Soul Stealer to land one final hit on Daisy's weak spot with his energy kick. The impact seemed to echo through everyone's ears and momentarily slow down time as Daisy flopped onto the floor, her Crystal Fist shattering on impact. Her body was as motionless as the Moirai were speechless.

"Well, I've had my fill," Kokoro said with a smug look. "And apparently, you've had yours."

"...Get ready, Grekka," Warra warned. "He said he's going after you next..."

"I will try to weaken him as much as I can," Grekka grimly replied, unlimbering his forearm machetes. "Hopefully, I can make it so that you'll be able to finish him off when I fall."

"It's unfortunate we won't get to finish what we started, Daisy," Bowser stoically said in mourning.

"You went down fighting," the Soul Stealer said in acknowledgment to the fallen earth wielder. "A noble end. That, I can respect." He went to retrieve his Scroll of Souls that was still off to the side of the arena and returned to unravel an empty section in front of Daisy's sprawled out body. "But before the last strands of your life fade away, I need to extract your soul. So..." He sat down opposite Daisy on the other side of the scroll and crossed his legs. He then closed his eyes and went into a trance that encased his body in a periwinkle glow. Everything within Daisy's blurry and dull field of vision went blank.

The next thing Daisy knew, she was awake and able to look around, but the environment had completely changed. She was somehow

back to standing and in an ethereal setting of what closely resembled a foggy and snow-covered outcropping on the outside of Castle Town, Sarasaland's capital. Kokoro's form faded into view four feet in front of her, as did the Scroll of Souls on the ground between them.

"I'm in your subconscious now," Kokoro said. "My body is in a trance-like state, only functioning to maintain the force field outside while my being is here standing apart from you. Your body has passed out, but it matters not, for the moment I strip your soul from your body, you will die. This action, which I am about to commence by means of the Soul Secure Spell...cannot be reversed."

The utterly defeated look on Daisy's face was not enough to express the chasm that had formed inside of her. Her sullen eyes projected the despair that now filled her dismally morose spirit. Finally broken, as was foretold by Kokoro, she responded, "Fine... Go ahead. I can't stop Elkon anyways..." and closed her eyes to await what would come next.

"Thank you; you're too kind..." the Soul Stealer remarked. "Normally, I would have to ensnare people within my binding spell to make sure they...adhere to my intentions, but this is a welcome gesture from you. I'll tell you what though; you don't have to worry about Elkon. For once I've taken the souls of you and those other five who are so eagerly awaiting their deaths, I'm going after Elkon's next."

The statement alarmed Daisy, invoking a flustered and confused, but muted, expression. She said nothing in response, but Kokoro saw that she wanted an explanation.

"You see, I'm not in this to help Elkon," said the Soul Stealer. "I'm in this to bolster my collection. He was a fool to trust me with his dirty work, especially for making me wait as long as I have, and for that, he will pay the ultimate price. His soul may very well be one of the most valuable in existence...but for now, we must deal with the matter at hand."

With one arm extended in front of Daisy's waist, Kokoro straightened out his index claw with a bit of light channeled into its point and proceeded to draw out an octagram in the air. Once he completed

the shape, he placed his palm in the center and twisted it to his left, causing the light octagram to spin and intensify its glow. The Scroll of Souls also began to gleam with light, and all of a sudden, Daisy could feel a strange force that felt like it was starting to rip apart her being. As sudden as she felt the force however, it cut off and left her spirit intact. The light octagram was now rotating right instead of left, drawing a big mass of light out of the Scroll of Souls.

"What the...my spell is being inverted?" Kokoro angrily griped. The mass of light struck him and knocked him away from Daisy. From the light, a body materialized and formed into a large, built man with rigid, medium-length black hair wearing silver pants and an orange shirt underneath a black jacket possessing the earth symbol on its back. The man turned to face the Moirai of Earth and touched his feet down to the ground where Kokoro formerly stood.

The Soul Stealer, knocked a good distance away from the two, slowly got back to his feet, furiously muttering, "...You..."

The man smiled at Daisy, who gazed at him with nothing short of an awestruck expression. There was no doubt in her mind who the person was that now stood before her. "...Master..." she whispered in shock. "...Terran..."

Chapter XXV

The Earth Master :

Daisy continued to stare in awe at Master Terran's appearance before her. She ignored Kokoro angrily returning to his feet behind her.

"When Kokoro went after me and took possession of my soul four years ago, he had asked where my student had gone," Terran explained. His calm and cool voice was a soothing respite from the dire situation Daisy was in. "The only conclusion I could come to was that he would be going after yours as well. So when I was able to sense that the Scroll of Souls had made a link with your soul, I worked my way into the link so that I could invert its effects and temporarily free my own spirit from the scroll's binding."

Daisy's mouth hung open, but no words formed. It had been ten years since she had last seen her old earth master. There was so much that she could say, but she didn't know what to say at all at that moment.

"What ten years can do to a person," Terran praised. "You've grown into quite a powerful earth wielder, and an even more formidable fighter. That much I can sense quite easily, but I had to make sure that I could see this for myself." He paused before adding, "It's just as I said, isn't it?"

Daisy's mouth remained agape for a couple more moments. She was still unsure of what to say, but she managed a hearty smile once she remembered what Terran had said of her so long ago.

"How touching," Kokoro scowled. "Now if you don't mind, Terran, I have something I'd like to finish. So if you could just get back in that scroll there-"

"Why don't you just get out of here!" Terran echoed. He stomped on the floor, causing the ground beneath them to shift and open up into a large chasm where Kokoro stood. The Soul Stealer dropped

through and Terran promptly closed up the hole to return the ground to normal. "That should take care of him for now," the earth master said. "Unfortunately, since this is just your subconscious, Kokoro is still alive and will likely awaken from his trance along with you once you leave here."

"Master!" Daisy heatedly exclaimed, tears streaming down her face as her voice cracked from the pent up frustration. "After you got away that night, I didn't know what happened to you! I certainly didn't expect you to succumb to that Soul Stealer crook! I wanted to go and chase after you but I couldn't – I couldn't do anything! After they took me back into town, they buffed up security and put me on lockdown! I wasn't allowed to do a damn thing except sit around in the castle and be a stupid, isolated princess! I hated my life so much – I hated myself so much! Everybody hated me so much! The more of a princess I became, the more the other people hated me! And the few times out of each month that I was able to leave the castle and get out into public, they thought I was just an annoyance and that I didn't belong among them! My parents hated me for trying to run away and never even so much as *smiled* at me ever since that night! Everyday I had to wake up to their irate faces that looked like they wished death on me! And then, before I even turned eighteen, my father dealt me off to a group of aliens to prevent Sarasaland from being looted of its resources and destroyed! Their leader, Tatanga, said they wanted to use me as a living power plant! Luckily, a fire wielder named Mario came and saved me from those aliens shortly afterwards and made them flee from this planet, but when he left and returned to his home, I was lost and I didn't know where to go! I didn't want to go back to Sarasaland and he said he was from the Mushroom Kingdom, so I tried to track down where it was and I've been staying there since! And I got so much stronger and faster and better with manipulating the earth there and I thought I could be there for a while and try to move forward, but I kept getting haunted by everything that happened back in Sarasaland! It just didn't make any sense to me at all and I've been filled with rage ever since! And then, I got called on this mission with a bunch of other people to reverse the corruption of the elements that was caused by this guy, Elkon, who knew who my father was and accused him of using elemental weapons for war! And we fought through and purified a bunch of the elements, but then we came

across Kokoro who was stationed here at the Ice Shrine – even though he says he's not allied with Elkon – and I tried to beat Kokoro and tried to do everything I could by doing everything you taught me but he was still too much! I was sure I could take him but he somehow found out that I had a very weak scar underneath my shirt and took advantage of that to-"

"Scar?" Terran asked in surprise. "I don't remember you having any scar."

"I stabbed myself," said Daisy. The somber tone of the confession starkly contrasted from the madly rambling pace she was in mere seconds ago. "The day when my mother flipped out and banished you from Sarasaland, I ran out the room and looked for the sharpest knife I could find and tried to pierce my heart...but I couldn't do it. You were the only reliable person I had with me there and the only one I felt I could trust, so when I heard that you had to leave and that I would be left all alone to deal with everyone and everything...I just didn't want to live my life anymore."

"I see..." Terran replied, shock on his face. "I had no idea... I'm sorry you had to go through all that. I'm sorry you had to go through even more than you were already going through when I was there with you. I wanted to try to return to the kingdom to get you and take you with me, but then your parents would've made me a fugitive by accusing me of kidnapping you, and we both would've just had to keep running from the legal system."

"No...it's fine," said Daisy, tears slowing to a stop as her stern expression resurfaced. "...It's fine. I'm fine."

"This Elkon character sounds interesting..." Terran said. "Daisy...what did he tell you?"

The Moirai of Earth paused as Elkon's words resonated in her mind. *But somewhere along the lines, you humans decided to implement nature into your warfare – You humans decided that nature's true form is destruction and devolution... My goal is to rid this world of humans with the very same thing they've been using to execute each other with for far too long now … Yes...* Y*our father made extensive use of earthquake-causing technologies to trample the*

towns and nations he overran. Your father had his fair share of involvement in all the violence that so many were forced to endure.

Daisy sighed, her voice deathly faint. "Well, long story short, Elkon said that he's going to make humans extinct because we're the reason the world is so corrupt today, and that we're the ones that truly caused the corruption of the elements long before he himself put any effects on them... because we as a race have misused nature to further our own selves at the expense of others, and we've used nature to bring about war, crime, and suffering upon ourselves."

"And you said Elkon told you that King Sarasa was one of these people that weaponized the elements for injustice?" the earth master asked.

"Yeah," Daisy replied.

"I'm not surprised," Terran muttered. "Ten years ago, I told you that you would have to runaway and leave Sarasaland. That direction was not without reason. However, I definitely did not expect you to have to deal with any aliens! My reasoning was the result of a different cause."

"What do you mean?" Daisy asked in confusion.

"Elkon was not too far off from his words at all," Terran said. "Because, Daisy, your father was indeed a tyrant."

Daisy's eyes widened in surprise upon hearing the confirmation of Elkon's words. If anyone knew anything about what had gone on in Sarasaland's great castle, it was Terran. She knew Elkon had to have some legitimacy to his reasoning, but now, what little doubt she had lingering in her mind was erased. "...Go on..." she mumbled.

"You must know what your family never told you," said Terran. "Your father renamed Sarasaland after himself. The kingdom now known as Sarasaland was invaded by your father in a tyrannical move of power. Any and all records of the kingdom before the Sarasaland era were destroyed by King Sarasa's forces to keep his image clean

for his followers. It was simply said that the area was 'annexed by union,' and that claim became what was supposedly divine word."

"...Wow... I would never have thought..." Daisy said, bowing her head.

"I'd like to say that that was all he's done, but I can't lie in good conscience," said Terran. "Your father had and still has a long history of dominating lower and weaker nations to gain land and resources, but mostly has done so to exercise his might. He did whatever and said whatever to make it appear as if he and all of his followers were prosperous and righteous, all the while keeping his true affairs and intentions under the table. To those within Sarasaland, he was glorious, magnificent, and the leader of their dreams. To those outside Sarasaland, he was one of the worst human beings on the planet. Because of propaganda and control of the media, Sarasaland's residents stayed ignorant to the true workings of the king and instead praised him for the prosperity that he brought to their land. However, information and truth from the outside eventually leaked in, causing a large portion of the population to despise the Sarasa family. A majority of the people though, were still supporters of the king. Because very few people were willing to doubt King Sarasa, outside information was twisted around on the inside to make people think that you were the reason why the Sarasa family was being given such a bad reputation from the world. As a consequence of the growing uncertainty regarding your father, a lot of hate was directed towards you yourself under the belief that you would bring about the ruin of the kingdom. Such claims would only be further perpetuated while King Sarasa continued his usual dealings in secret. His military, council, and everyone that was closely affiliated with him, including myself, had to swear on our lives an oath to keep word of his affairs within our ranks and away from the public."

"But why would he do such terrible things?" Daisy demanded to know. "What gave him the incentive to do it all?"

"It's simple," Terran answered. "He feared his death to a substantial degree, and therefore was not content with being just a human. He wanted to transcend the mortal body; he wanted to become a god. And he believed that the more dominion he had, the less mortal he

became. King Sarasa did whatever he could to move closer and closer to his goal. To him, all he saw were means to his own ends, not morals or honor, or even respect for the people whose lands he and his forces overran."

"...I don't think I understand..." Daisy murmured with wide eyes.

"I didn't tell you this at the time because you were only twelve, and your parents were quite strict when it came to your future," Terran said. "The reason your parents – particularly your father – forced the role of princess upon you was to carry on what King Sarasa himself knew he would not be able to carry on forever. He put special emphasis on his legacy because although it wasn't a true form of immortality, it was as close to a form of immortality as a mortal could achieve. In handing the kingdom to you, King Sarasa's legacy would continue through you and he would, in a way, live on through you when the time came for him to pass on into the afterlife. It was his way of escaping death and maintaining the power he had accumulated over the years. Power would also be kept within the Sarasa bloodline. And not only would he pass down the kingdom to you, but he would also pass down his tyranny to you whether you were aware of what was going on or not. But I didn't want that to happen to you. I wouldn't allow it, because I didn't want to see you, who had such determination, such hope, such promise, and such strength - physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional – end up a power-mad, lonely, psychopathic warlord...so I warned you to leave Sarasaland before King Sarasa granted you control of the kingdom. I wanted to save you from that fate, because he would've changed you, Daisy...for the worse."

Daisy made a quick gasp in surprise, but didn't say anything.

"I was hoping the king and queen would be able to eventually see you for who you really are," Terran continued. "But some things never change, unfortunately, and your parents are a lost cause – that much I can tell now seeing as how things have remained unresolved between you and them after all this time. Before I was overpowered by Kokoro, Sarasaland was still well within King Sarasa's control, and was all but certain to remain that way." Terran's face took on a dark, foreboding look before he added, "There's a very real possibility that in the near future, he may

attempt to track you down and force you into the role he originally intended you to take."

Daisy's eyes grew wide and irate as she stuttered out, "Then...that means..."

"You'll have to confront him," Terran concluded for her. "And in doing so, you'll have to stop him and his oppressive dictatorship. If he is able to continue with his plans, he will eventually try to spread Sarasaland over larger and larger areas until he has control over the whole planet. The cost of trying to maintain his ever-growing nation and military strength will cause even his own people and supporters to pay the price and suffer just to make sure that his megalomania is sustained. Knowing the kind of man he is, he may even try to extend his influence out to other planets. I fear that this may be inevitable if he decides to abandon the plans he had laid out for you."

The Moirai of Earth attentively stared at the earth master. No words of his were lost on her.

"On the other hand, none of it will matter if Elkon succeeds in wiping out the human race," Terran said. "You'll have to deal with Elkon first."

"Right," Daisy replied with a soft nod. "Of course."

"If I recall, you did say that Elkon was well aware of your father and his actions," said Terran. "I would've expected as much. In fact, that's exactly what I would've expected him to say. Although, he may have undersold it a bit."

"What makes you say that?" Daisy wondered.

Terran's tone lowered as he told her, "You'll find that the link between your father and Elkon is a lot more intricate than you could have ever imagined."

"Wait, you know who he is?" Daisy asked.

"I do know...but I can't tell you," Terran solemnly replied. "You'll have to learn that information through Elkon himself."

"What do you mean you can't tell me?" Daisy gruffly snapped. "The fate of the world is resting on our success against Elkon, and you won't tell me who he really is?"

Terran nodded. "It's the only way for you to truly understand not just who he is, but why he is, and why his intentions are what they are now. If I were to tell you myself, you would simply set out to destroy him, without knowing the whole story; the crucial story. And even if you succeed on that path, you'll ultimately fail in saving this world in the long run because humanity would not be able to benefit from the comprehension and wisdom that right now is only achievable through him."

"Then, please," Daisy urged. "Tell me; how am I supposed to stop Elkon? And how am I supposed to go about stopping my dad? I couldn't even stop Kokoro! I mean, even with all my training and effort that I put in, Kokoro's still more powerful than I am! Why did you put so much confidence and faith in me, Master? You always said I had all this power, but if I really do, then how can everyone else still be so much more powerful? All my life I kept trying to get better than I was before, and now I have the chance to use my power to help out the world – and it's still not enough! How worthless does that make me-"

"Did you really use all your power against Kokoro?" asked Terran.

Daisy perked up with a dumbstruck expression. "...What...what do you mean?"

"I can sense that you have untapped reserves that you never even knew existed," said Terran. "It had to be given time to develop, and you had to become strong enough to be able to tolerate that power. I'm pretty sure that's why Kokoro wanted to go after your soul in the first place."

"Yeah, he said," Daisy confirmed. "But I thought for sure I had pulled it all out when I made my Crystal Fist."

"No, not even close," the earth master said.

The Moirai of Earth expressed a sense of disbelief on her face.

"...I...I don't get it..." she muttered. "...How can that even be?..."

"You have to get out of your own way and let the energy flow," said Terran. "And the only way to do that is to leave your past behind you, and look forward. You can't linger over what happened before, but you can change the outcome of the future based on what you do now. What your parents put you through when you were young has no bearing on who you are now. Who you are now is up to you, just as it always has been. Your spirit has been in turmoil for so long now that you made a home in it and assumed that you'd have to live in that turmoil for life, but it doesn't have to be that way. The only thing that's stopping you from moving forward from Sarasaland...is you. And therefore, the only thing that's stopping you from accessing your true power, is you. I hate to say this, but...Sarasaland is not your enemy – your parents are. You can say that all of Sarasaland, including your parents, was against you, but if you look closer...then you can see that your father caused Sarasaland to be your enemy. To really access the power that is still dormant within you, you must come to terms with everything about yourself and with everything that has happened. That is the only way you'll be able to beat Elkon *and* your father."

Daisy bowed her head as her eyes dimmed. "Why... How could you expect so much of me?... Why would you put so much effort into me...after everything... I'm just so...worthless..."

"Because, Daisy; you were a daughter to me," said Terran. "From the moment I was hired to train you, I saw the neglect that you received from your parents and made it my duty to rectify their ill-treatment. Although to be honest, I never in my wildest dreams imagined that the both of us would be taken as far as we have. You never tried to appeal to anyone, but your parents forced you to conform to their vision of what they wanted you to be. Though through it all, even when you were at your lowest, you were the single most hopeful and driven person I had ever met. In no way were you at all worthless at any point in time, nor have you given me any reason to doubt you. I identified with you, and saw in you what your parents did not care for, so I wanted to do what I could for you, and develop you the way you were meant to develop so that you could truly decide for yourself who you wanted to be."

"...You identified with me?" Daisy asked in amazement. "How, Master? I have so many questions!"

"...Maybe another time, on another day..." Terran gently assured. "Maybe in another life...the next life."

"Wait, what do you mean..." Daisy half-asked.

"I can feel the Scroll of Souls pulling me back into its seal," said Terran as his body started to glimmer and disintegrate back into the scroll on the floor. "Like I said...another time..."

"Terran... " Daisy murmured.

"I'm grateful we had time to talk..." Terran's voice echoed. "Hopefully, you'll have at least a few more decades with the living before we meet again."

"Master! Wait – Don't go!" Daisy urged. "There's just so much I don't know, and you're the only one that I could actually trust in this world!... Unless what Bowser said all those nights ago was true... I guess he was right in saying that I'll have to walk alone in my path for the rest of my life. It probably is just better for me that way."

"You've definitely been way beyond needing my guidance," Terran replied. "And it seems to me that you've got a very good team – or rather, a great group of friends – that you can put your trust in, especially considering how far you've all made it together."

Daisy promptly thought back for a brief moment to the support that each of the Moirai had given her back at Maralah and all throughout their time together before giving her subtle response. "...I do...don't I..."

"Through the rest of this journey, you all must discover for yourselves what it truly means to be a hero," Terran asserted. "That is the only way you will be able to fully help this world. For all this to be able to happen, you will have to stop Elkon, but you can't just kill him in cold-blooded homicide on the spot. You must find out Elkon's intentions through his words, not mine. Then, you will know for sure what you have to do next."

"...Okay, Master," Daisy murmured. "...I think I understand..."

"Your name, 'Sarasa', has no meaning at all on record in any language," said the earth master. "The rest of the people in the world who have heard of Sarasa but are not a part of Sarasaland only know it to mean 'tyrant.' So it is up to *you* to give the name meaning. You must create that meaning for yourself to replace the definition of tyranny that your father has given the name. So ask yourself; What does 'Sarasa' mean?"

"Ask...myself?" Daisy asked.

"Yes," Terran softly replied. "Because only *you* , know the answer. Once you realize that, then there's no stopping you." He then heartily smiled as he gave his parting message. "And if there's anyone, who can set the world right, it's you Daisy. Remember everything I told you... You can do it..." At the conclusion of his final words, the great earth master's body finished its return back to within the Scroll of Souls. The Moirai of Earth, silent tears running down her solemn and indignant face, stood with the knowledge that that would be the last time she would see her former master alive again.

If at any point you're in a really rough patch, know that you can get through it, no matter what it takes, Terran's voice from ten years ago echoed through her mind. *If you were in a situation where you needed a lot of energy but you were completely out of it, you'd be able to run on your emotions and will power alone...*

The fiery spark suddenly returned to Daisy's will. Her steely resolve that Kokoro had succeeded in quelling was now restored in its entirety with no intention of ever being suppressed again. *Thanks...* Daisy said in her mind. *...Master...*

Chapter XXVI

The Awakening :

Kokoro's eyes snapped open, signaling his awakening from his trance. He quickly got up with his scroll and leapt backwards, not sure what to expect next. Daisy's body was still sprawled out and lifeless, but he knew that she was still alive. Even so, he didn't expect her to be for long.

How does one actually invert my spell to escape from the Scroll of Souls? Kokoro thought in his mind with angst. *Damn humans... Incessant little creatures they are. No matter though, since I'll still have all six of these wielders' souls collected when all is said and done!*

Suddenly, Daisy's body began to move, much to the chagrin of the Soul Stealer. The Moirai lit up with surprise and delight to see their teammate slowly pressing herself off the ground trying to get back to her feet.

"Alright, Daisy!" Marut shouted, hopping up and down in place.

"She's getting up..." Warra murmured.

"Is this really happening?" Bowser said in awe.

"The endurance of earth wielders are quite formidable," Grekka said under his breath.

"That's not endurance!" Athelstan said. "That's just good ol', straight-up guts!"

"Some people just don't now how to die..." Kokoro muttered to himself, charging his hand with a dense and radiating sphere of light. "But here...let me show you-"

Without any prior warning, the force field that had been encircling Kokoro and Daisy shattered to pieces and fell to the floor before

dematerializing and fading away. The arena that Daisy and Kokoro had been fighting in returned to being the main eight-way junction for the entire Ice Shrine as access through the area was restored. Everyone's attention – except Daisy's, who was still trying to get back to her feet and stand up – was drawn to behind Bowser and Athelstan, who turned around as well once they saw everyone gazing in their direction.

"Alright," Kokoro snapped. "Who's got the balls..."

"Who are they?" Warra wondered aloud. "Are they with us?"

"I don't know..." Athelstan said. "But they're both powerful..."

Ramona, with an outstretched and glowing hand, and Andrew both stood behind Bowser and Athelstan. There was no doubt that both of them meant business by their mannerisms.

"Shrines?" Andrew asked.

"Shrines," Bowser responded.

"Elkon?"

"Elkon."

"Enough said," Andrew determined, flaring shadow energy around his hands. "Introductions come later."

"Excellent," Kokoro haughtily projected. "Two more souls to add to my collection."

"Who's the guy in the Halloween costume?" Andrew asked.

Kokoro ignored the shadow wielder as he prepared to erect a replacement force field. "I know you're eager to meet your deaths, but as was already determined prior to your arrival, you'll all have to wait until I've finished my business here..."

"In case you weren't aware, I was the one that dispelled your barrier," Ramona told Kokoro. "As long as I'm here, you're not going to be able to use force fields, I can assure you that."

"What...oh, that figures," the Soul Stealer grumbled. "So you're a light wielder then, huh?" he asked the girl who possessed a somewhat timid disposition. "Fine. I probably shouldn't be wasting energy with force fields anyways now that I've got eight souls to capture instead of six-"

"Hey!" Marut suddenly cried out. "What's happening to Daisy?!"

Everyone turned their attention back to the large eight-way intersection where the Moirai of Earth had just returned to her feet. Her body was hunched over and her head was down and concealing her face, but a white, swirling and sparkling light had began to encompass and surround her whole body as she went through a slow transformation right before everyone's eyes. Her skin became glossy and shiny with a stark increase in contrast and shadows. Her hair stiffened to appear somewhat spiky, mildly jutting outwards in thick, horizontal, asymmetrical strands over and out both in front and behind her head.

Kokoro and the other elemental wielders sensed that her energy production began to increase dramatically as well. Daisy slowly arched her back to straighten out her posture and tilted her head up just enough to allow her face to become visible and reveal her most prominent new features – deep gold eyes with black talon markings under each one extending down past her nose. Almost as prominent was how gentle the transformation occurred, it being a gradual change that produced very little noise and only took about a half-minute to complete. The white light then dissipated as quietly as it came, and Daisy, livid yet tranquil, now stood across from Kokoro, staring him down with a piercing gaze.

"Daisy..." Warra mumbled in angst, sweat beading on his head.

"This looks kinda freaky," Marut said with uncertainty.

"Has she ever done this before?" Athelstan asked Bowser.

"...No, never..." the Moirai of Fire answered.

"Is that the Nova Form?" Ramona asked in tense fascination.

"Nova Form?" Bowser asked. "What's that?"

"She's standing against me once more..." Kokoro murmured to himself. "All doubt has been removed..."

Ramona and Andrew both rushed forward to take up position next to Daisy. "We've come to provide assistance," the Moirai of Light said as she unsheathed her rapier.

"...Get back," Daisy ordered to Ramona and Andrew. The two perked up with perplexed faces.

"I understand that you're in the Nova Form, but you look like you're in very bad shape regardless," Ramona argued. "And this fiend here doesn't look or feel like an easy-"

"I appreciate your help, but you guys just need to stay back," Daisy solemnly said to all the Moirai without breaking her gaze on Kokoro. "I don't plan on losing."

Ramona and Andrew paused for a moment, but they eventually deferred to obey the Moirai of Earth's wishes and backtracked into the hallway where Bowser and Athelstan were standing. Daisy kept her eye contact locked onto the Soul Stealer.

"So this...is what I've actually been waiting for..." Kokoro said under his breath, rolling up the Scroll of Souls and tossing it to the side once more.

Daisy said nothing in response, only maintaining her stare. Her gold eyes seemed to pierce through the shadow that her hair projected over the top portion of her face.

"You did those two a service," Kokoro softly said. "It was wise to keep them back...to give them a few extra moments of life. I swear, people can be so rude when they're impatient."

The earth wielder's expression increased in tension after the Soul Stealer's comment. Her stare became *soul-piercing* .

"...But then again, they both seem so eager to donate their souls to me," the archfiend continued, shifting his eyes away from Daisy to

gaze at the other Moirai. "Almost as eager as the other five..."

"Hey, shut up!" Bowser yelled. "Sick psychopath!"

"DO I HEAR A VOLUNTEER?!" Kokoro projected into the air. "Since you opened your mouth, how about I accommodate you first?" He turned to his left at Bowser and raised his right arm as he charged an outrageously lethal amount of light energy into his index and middle claws. Daisy's eyes flared open to the max once she saw Kokoro take aim at Bowser. In under a second, she was up in front of Kokoro and his charged clawtips. The speed at which she sprang in front of him startled him more than he wanted to admit.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Kokoro had froze in place, even though his energy remained charged. Daisy grabbed a hold of his outstretched elbow and clamped down on the joint, prompting a painful and ghastly scream from the archfiend.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" Kokoro scowled. "Let go of me!"

The Moirai of Earth did not respond and proceeded to squeeze on Kokoro's elbow, who was furiously grunting and wriggling trying to get out. The light energy in his claw was cut off in an instant – along with circulation – as Daisy continued adding more force into her crushing grip. The Soul Stealer's head beaded sweat in response to the great stress that began to overrun not just his arm but his body as a whole.

"Don't you dare threaten any of these people," Daisy viciously snarled. "These are my teammates! And more importantly, these are all my friends!"

"AHHHH!" Kokoro screeched as he felt his elbow joint compress and implode.

"Enough is ENOUGH!" Daisy growled. "Not only do you have a whole record filled with countless lives that you've slaughtered, including my master, but you keep *insisting* on adding more?"

The Soul Stealer used his free arm to grab on to his restrained arm

to try and urge himself free without success. He kept tugging and trying to pull away, but he found that not only could he not free his arm, but he could not move from where he was standing.

"It's people like you who are the reason the world is what it is today!" Daisy yelled. "You just take! You're never satisfied!"

Kokoro dropped to his knees in agony, finding the ordeal unbearably mortalizing. His suffering had now become quite audible and reverberated within the Ice Shrine.

Daisy's anger further intensified. "Of all the lives that you've killed. How many of them have you looked in the eyes before you slammed theirs shut forever?!"

The pressure on Kokoro's elbow was now nearing a critical point, causing his body to tremble and shake as a way to cope with the pain.

"But why am I asking?" the earth wielder sarcastically yelled in ever mounting rage. "You don't care! I can see that. Your scroll is proof enough...ISN'T IT?!"

A sudden snap occurred and echoed throughout the Ice Shrine, followed by a tormented shriek, and finally, deep and heavy moaning. Daisy let go of the tension in her hand to allow Kokoro the opportunity to slip away and hop backwards to give himself distance. The Moirai stared into the grand eight-way junction with stunned and dumbstruck expressions; Kokoro was slouched over, and his right arm was completely limp.

"...How does that feel..." Daisy coldly asked.

"You broke my elbow," Kokoro bitterly spat back. "HOW DO YOU THINK IT FEELS?!"

Daisy didn't answer, and just stared at the struggling being. She didn't show any expression other than the calmly irate face that she had on display since she had transformed. Kokoro however, was visibly becoming quite animated and infuriated with the entire situation.

"Woah..." Marut said under his breath. "Is this for real?"

"Yeah..." Bowser answered. "It looks like it."

"I definitely was not expecting that from Daisy at all," said Athelstan.

"None of us were..." said Warra.

Kokoro's arm began to swell at the elbow joint, but he managed to get enough feeling and control back into it to be able to at least stop it from looking so lifeless. As far as practicality was concerned, Daisy had rendered the arm useless. Before he could react any further, Daisy zipped behind him and kneed him in his lower back, causing a brutally painful hyperextension of his lumbar vertebrae. Stumbling forward, the Soul Stealer tried to turn himself around and react to any upcoming attack but was too slow and caught a powerful punch in his jaw that chained with an even more powerful elbow thrust into his chest.

Kokoro didn't even have a chance to get knocked back because Daisy had grabbed hold of his neck from the back as soon as her elbow had connected. With her grasp around his neck, she threw him face-first into the ground in the *exact* same manner one would spike a football. The thud echoed all throughout the Ice Shrine, but the move was not enough to subdue the archfiend. Regardless, an eerie stretch of time passed in which Kokoro remained down and motionless.

There was nothing but silence for a while, but Daisy stood fully aware that he was still conscious and more likely than not up to something. With him flattened on the ground and Daisy standing right above him, Kokoro seized the moment and took the opportunity to flip himself over and throw his good arm up at Daisy to fire an improbably fast beam of intense light upwards at her head. Just as improbable, the Moirai of Earth bent her torso as far backwards as it would go the instant the beam of light escaped from Kokoro's hand to somehow evade what would've been a potentially fatal hit. The absurdly-powered light beam shot off high into the air, its radiation interfering with and eliciting a temporary distortion of the northern lights. Daisy, able to maintain balance, returned to her upright position.

"WHAT?!" Kokoro screamed. "HOW DID YOU DODGE THAT?"

Daisy said nothing. She maintained her intense stare at Kokoro.

"What did you say that was again?" Warra asked Ramona. "Regarding the eyes? And the skin and hair?"

"Nova Form," the Moirai of Light replied. "I don't know much about it at all, but I know it exists, and I've seen it before from a fire wielder when I heard someone bring up the term to describe said wielder. I just formed a link using the very same characteristics you just pointed out."

"This is certainly proving to be an advantageous development," said Grekka.

"This is certainly proving to be just as frightening as well," Warra added with unease.

Kokoro swiftly got up and made multiple backwards hops away from Daisy, who continued her fierce and unhappy gaze. "Okay then," he said. "How well do you think you'll fare against this?!" The Soul Stealer raised his left arm to draw power from the northern lights above. He continued to draw until he had a rapidly pulsating elliptical orb of highly radiating light energy five-feet in diameter in his hand, then threw it at the Moirai of Earth. With the speedy blast heading her way, Daisy stood firm and readied herself to make her move. Once the light burst was in range, she cupped her fist and, with a heart-stopping battle cry, swung a massive overhead punch that deflected the energy back at Kokoro. Unable to block as a result of his right arm being too weak, he was swallowed by his reflected attack and overwhelmed by its great force. Before the concentrated energy could do any permanent damage however, he used his one good arm to take control of and dispel the blast. The archfiend was still on his feet, but the momentum of the battle had completely flipped in Daisy's favor.

"...No more, Kokoro..." Daisy said, quiet as the night. The Soul Stealer gasped in surprise and confusion, but didn't say anything back. "...It's over... No more..." she softly repeated.

"What do you mean, 'no more?' " Kokoro snapped. He grew more irritated and frustrated as time went on.

"Your sick game," said Daisy. "At least Elkon has tangible purpose for his actions...but you have no purpose – you're as shameful as you are contemptible, and quite frankly, I'm getting sick of looking at you."

Kokoro began softly laughing at her words, regaining his calm and ignoring the sharpness in her tone. "Why do you loathe what I've done so much," he sadistically derided. "Humans are just as ruthless as I am. You're all murderers and criminals; the scourge of the planet... And you have the gall to condemn what I've done? If anything, my actions have *helped* to cleanse the world. The only significant thing the human race has accomplished was the initiation of the destruction of this planet that slowly but surely grows ever weaker as a result of your kind. You see, how can you label me as shameful when all you all do is wreck the world just so you can kill each other? You and your power-hungry race all belong in Hell!"

"I thought you didn't identify with Elkon and his goal?" Daisy hoarsely asked.

"I don't! I'm just stating facts," Kokoro said, frustration returning. "And the fact of the matter is, you're just like me. You *all* are, whether you're aware of it or not."

Daisy's solemnly furious look continued, but she made no response to the Soul Stealer's statement. The Moirai all kept quiet.

"And just for the record...this 'game' is over when *I* say it's OVER!" Kokoro howled. Rushing forward at Daisy, he put an immense amount of force into a hook that caught the earth wielder in the side of her jaw. Her body swayed back but was not knocked from her feet. Neither fighter moved for a handful of seconds until something caught the Soul Stealer's eye.

Through Kokoro's vision, Daisy turned her head back around frame by frame to pierce though his own soul with her skin deep stare. The Moirai of Earth was unfazed, and did not even acknowledge the fact that she was just hit. Kokoro, for the first time in his long life, did not

force the feeling of terror on the face of his victims, but rather displayed it on his own face instead. He gasped and leapt away, backtracking out of range. "You..." he sputtered out, visibly shaken. "Who are you? What are you?!... ANSWER ME!"

"Who am I?" Daisy asked in response. "What am I? That's a good question."

The Soul Stealer seemed to be still, but he was quivering ever so slightly with uncertainty regarding the massive comeback from his opponent. The fact that she still stood despite all the damage she had received from earlier infuriated him even more.

"For a long time, a lot of people didn't know the answer to that," Daisy said, deep in thought. "To be honest, I didn't even know the answer to that myself...mostly because I was never given the option or the opportunity to answer for myself, but in a strange way, I never let myself answer either... But now I know, that who I am, is in the name; my name."

Kokoro's jaw was clenched and trembling in anger as he listened to the Moirai of Earth. He wanted to rip her arms out of their sockets.

"And that's where the disconnect is," Daisy continued. "My name will not adopt the meaning of tyranny that my father has tainted it with. When all is said and done, I am the one in control of my life *and* my destiny, and therefore, my name. With the heart of the earth...and the endurance to match..."

The Moirai all listened intently to the words of their teammate, giving her their full attention. "My name..." Daisy said, soft in tone yet firm in sureness. "...Is...is the name of *unfaltering will* . From this day forward, that is the meaning of 'Sarasa.' My master bestowed upon me the task of reviving and giving new meaning to a name that my father has sullied, so I must honor his final wishes by upholding an unfaltering will in the face of ever increasing adversity. 'Sarasa' is my responsibility, and I will proudly carry on that name! With as far as I've come and all that I've managed to get through, I can't stop or give up! Especially not now – there's too much on the line!"

The northern lights above appeared to ever so slightly shine brighter

through the pitch-black sky as the Moirai of Earth spoke. "I will stand true to my name – to unfaltering will – as the challenges become evermore difficult, because I will have to keep overcoming obstacles for as long as I live. So no matter how tough it gets for me, no matter how painful it may get, no matter how much the odds are against me, no matter how much wrong I have to right...regardless of who I must confront...I'll walk on, I'll keep pushing, I'll keep fighting, I'll keep pressing forward even if in the end, I'm on my own... I'll do it all because that's who I am, and that's who I've always been!"

After several seconds of quiet from Daisy's awestricken teammates, Kokoro began laughing manically. "Your noble speeches mean nothing!" he barked. " 'Sarasa' should stand for 'false nobility,' because I know for a fact that you're just itching to kill me right here in cold-blooded, self-satisfying vengeance. You've done a good job so far with my arm – it feels like you've completely mangled everything that comprised the elbow joint. To be dreadfully honest, I wonder if I even still have a right elbow now. I know you had no intentions of stopping there. You just want to curb your desire for revenge just like every other human does."

No response came from the Moirai of Earth. She didn't feel the need to.

"Empty words," Kokoro sneered. "What have you got to say to that?"

"You broke my master's neck," Daisy flatly said. "Since you broke at the very least one person's neck, that means you can handle living without an elbow, doesn't it?"

"Huh?" the Soul Stealer asked in surprise. "What do you mean?

"You're not dying," said Daisy. "Even considering a life as despicable as yours, I don't have it in me to snuff it out."

"...Not like you could have anyways," said Kokoro. "You miraculously get covered in posing oil and your eyes change color and now you want to think you're high and mighty after I clearly dominated here today?"

"Okay then, let's continue," Daisy calmly replied. "I can prove you

wrong without taking away your life."

"...Alright Fine," Kokoro angrily said, sweat beading down his head. He formed an intensely bright orb of light in his good hand. "We'll continue...at a later date!"

"What," Daisy said, grimacing.

"LUMINOUS SPARK!" Kokoro shouted, chucking his sphere of light high into the air. At its apex, the light energy imploded and then reversed its direction and exploded outwards. The result was a blinding wave of white light that all the Moirai had to cover their eyes to shield against. After several moments, the light faded away and the elemental wielders slowly regained their sense of vision. Unfortunately for them, Kokoro was nowhere to be seen.

"I can't sense his energy signature at all," said Andrew.

"Neither can I," Athelstan said.

"Damnit!" Bowser yelled. "He got away!"

"...That figures," Daisy muttered. "Nothing but a true coward..."

"We have to pursue him!" Ramona demanded.

"Let him go," Daisy sternly ordered. "He's not going to come back here. He could care less about Elkon or the state of the elements."

Bowser, Athelstan, Ramona, and Andrew walked towards Daisy, who stood towards the center of the eight-way junction. Warra, Marut, and Grekka jumped down from the higher second level to rejoin their team at the ground floor.

"You know what, Daisy; that's a terrible decision," said Warra. "A terrible decision that's going to come back and bite you sooner or later, if not all of us."

"I'll deal with it when the time comes when I have to deal with it," said Daisy. "He'll have to go through me before he can get to any of you. I'll be sure of that."

"For your sake, I hope you know what you're doing," Bowser said under his breath.

"I do," the Moirai of Earth assured. "It's Kokoro that doesn't know what he's doing. Whether he figures that out or not, I don't know."

To be so merciful after all that he's done , Grekka thought. *I don't think I've ever encountered a being with that kind of persona.*

"Why didn't you tell us Daisy?" Warra asked, pulling out his special bottle. "About your scar, I mean... My healing water could have assisted and helped heal what never finished healing."

Daisy stretched the neck of her shirt just enough to fully reveal the dark and distorted scar on the upper left portion of her chest. "What would've gave me incentive to tell this to anyone? It's a symbol of a battle that I lost..."

"It's a symbol of a battle that you've won," said Ramona.

"Had you lost, you would not have been here," Andrew said, rotating his right arm to reveal a thick, four inch-long scar halfway up his forearm. Daisy's eyes widened at the sight of the mark, both surprised by the breadth of the scar as well as the fact that Andrew had not covered it up. "You won," the shadow wielder said. "You may or may not realize that, but that's okay."

"We don't know what circumstances you've had to go through," Ramona added. "But we do know that it must have been an enormous burden to warrant you wanting to do what you did. I know my partner and I just met you, but I wish we had a full understanding of your troubles."

"No, it's fine," said Daisy. "You don't have to understand anything. I can't make anybody understand anything. You just have to understand what you can, and if you can't understand, then you can't understand. And just because you can comprehend someone doesn't mean you can understand them... The why and the how manage to elude everyone..."

"But we can sympathize and empathize," said Andrew.

Warra commanded the healing water to run over and infuse its properties into Daisy's scar, then retracted the water back into a mass overhead and made it rotate at sonic speeds to sterilize it once more before recollecting it back in his bottle. "That's quite mysterious how that never healed," he said. "It's like a lesser version of a scar; like an imperfect imperfection if you will, but the water should restart the biological processes that will heal it properly. The scar is there for life, unfortunately, but at least it won't be a weak spot anymore."

"Thanks," Daisy said to Warra, before addressing the group as a whole. "All of you."

"That's what friends are for!" Marut replied.

"Come along, you," Bowser directed to Grekka, heading towards the pedestal where the Ice Gemstone rested.

"Look!" Marut hollered. "He left the Scroll of Souls!"

All eight of the Moirai moved toward the scroll that was left abandoned by Kokoro. Daisy stepped forward and stared at the partially unraveled scroll littered with countless names inscribed to face in various directions. She did not see Terran's name on the scroll, but she knew that it was somewhere on that large roll of paper.

"Bowser," Daisy murmured. "If you will...please?"

The Moirai of Fire looked at Daisy, who gave him a non-verbal signal of what she wanted him to do. Bowser understood in an instant and gave her a nod, then stepped forward beside her to get a quick glance at the scroll and its list of conquests. He flared a fireball and dropped it onto the Scroll of Souls, burning the paper to ashes and consequently releasing all the souls sealed within.

"Maybe now, they may finally be able to rest in peace, now that they're no longer bound to that paper prison," Daisy said, almost inaudible. In a few seconds, her skin, hair, eyes, and energy all smoothly returned to normal. Daisy herself though, was not aware of her initial transformation or her reversion back to her original state.

Once the Scroll of Souls finished burning and was reduced to ashes, Bowser and Grekka resumed their walk towards the Ice Gemstone. As was done with all the previous shrines, Bowser took out the Dimensional Mirror and positioned it at a distance about ten feet from the pedestal, the lens aimed directly at the gemstone. "Just send your elemental energy through it, like you saw Marut do at the Air Shrine," the Koopa King told Grekka.

The Moirai of ice did just that, sending elemental ice energy through the lens that was subsequently magnified in a way that would cleanse the gemstone and undo the corruption of ice. Grekka's extraordinarily high energy allowed for the process to be completed in under a minute with no noticeable exertion from him.

"There; that should stop the expansion of the arctic regions," said Grekka. "Any arctic expansion that was made through the corruption of ice will now melt away and recede back to its natural boundaries. Expect the temperature here to return to its natural cold in a matter of hours, and ice will once again be susceptible to melting when the air temperature is above freezing."

"Excellent," Bowser said. The two marched back to their group, but saw that right behind them, Metal Mario was back at the entryway and making a run at the Moirai. The koopa did not have to yell out a warning since the metal figure's loud and clanky steps caught everyone's attention. The icicles from Grekka were all still lodged in its body.

"Not again!" Athletsan griped.

"So this is where we sent that Metal Mario," Ramona said to Andrew.

"You did that?!" Bowser shouted.

"Sorry?!" Andrew said with a shrug. "We'll just send him somewhere else!"

Metal Mario ran as fast as it could – which wasn't fast at all – at the Moirai. Ramona and Andrew moved to the forefront and stood together to perform the same dimensional portal technique that they

used in Elkon's tower. Just as the metal figure got close, the portal came into being. Metal Mario then ran into the portal, and the light and shadow wielders disbanded the portal before the metal figure realized it was even in the portal.

"It's not very smart if it let us do that to it twice," Ramona remarked.

"What do you mean 'twice?!' " Bowser yelled. "And why'd you send it here in the first place?"

"We didn't know we sent it here!" Ramona replied.

"It takes us a few moments to lock on to where we want to make the portal lead to," said Andrew. "So if we create a portal without an opportunity to determine where we want the destination to be, then, well-"

"So you have no idea where you sent Metal Mario just now either, do you?" Bowser said in a cutoff.

"Nope!" Andrew happily replied. All the other Moirai besides he and Ramona fell over on their faces in shock.

"Yeah," Ramona said, rubbing her cheek with her fingers. "At least it's not here anymore though! Good enough, right?"

As everyone quickly returned to their feet, an astral clone of Rosalina appeared before them and motioned for their attention. "I cannot stay here for long at this time," said Rosalina. "So I will simply give you all direction. Head to The Great Valley, east-southeast from here and just west of the Light Shrine. We will need to discuss the next part of your quest there." Then, just as quickly as she came, her astral clone vanished.

"And 'hello' to you too, granny," Bowser said in sarcasm.

"I don't think I'll ever understand how the Elder of the Cosmos does that," said Andrew.

"If you mean her communication with us, it's by astral clone," said Bowser.

"Astral clone?" the Moirai of Shadow asked in confusion. "Don't you mean a 'cosmic clone?' "

"No, no," Bowser replied. "An astral clone looks almost exactly like the original person is selectively intangible and all ghost-like and sparkly. Cosmic clones are cosmic clones! Just think of the difference between a hologram projection and a heatseeking brick."

"Hey, all eight of us are here now!" Marut cheered. "This is so awesome! We're all now combined together as a complete team!"

"See ya," Grekka abruptly muttered, walking towards the entryway to leave the Ice Shrine.

"Wait, what?!" Marut asked.

"I've accomplished what was needed of me," the Moirai of ice said. "The Ice Shrine has been purified. There's no place for me here."

"Of course there's a place for you here," Daisy assured. "You were called to duty by destiny for a reason."

"We all were," Bowser added, giving indirect reassurance to Daisy.

"You must stay with us, Grekka," said Warra.

"I cannot," the white-clothed fighter responded.

"Hey, Grekka!" Marut said. "Where else would you rather be right now than right here? Where else would you rather be than here doing what we're doing?"

"I can't be here..." Grekka responded. "Sorry." He started walking again towards the entrance of the shrine. "I must leave... Let me do what I must."

"But, why?" Marut asked. Grekka did not answer, continuing to walk until he disappeared from sight into the entryway. Marut's mouth dropped open as he made a short and upset squeal.

"What's his deal?" Athelstan wondered aloud about the departing ice wielder.

Chapter XXVII

Destiny Wind :

It was around midnight when the Moirai, minus Grekka, left the Ice Shrine. When they had returned to Bowser's Offroader, the Koopa King unpacked camping supplies that he had brought along and distributed much needed food that they had graciously received from Delight City for their efforts in helping out the metropolis. In doing so, the seven elemental wielders would be fed and would be able to get some valuable rest before moving on to their next destination.

Some time after dawn broke, they all awoke from their slumber ready to continue the mission, although Ramona and Andrew both still had to endure night terrors since light and shadow were still corrupted. They had all packed up their things back into the truck and quickly got back on the road to The Great Valley, where Rosalina had previously said to meet her. After a three hour ride east-southeast, as per Rosalina's instruction which corroborated nicely with Athelstan's notes from Kallantown, Bowser slowed the truck to a halt and the Moirai all disembarked the vehicle.

"Alright, Bros and brodettes, homies and homettes, guys and...guydettes," said Marut with his hands on his hips. "We're here in The Great Valley!"

The area was vast and wide, enclosed by mountain ranges on each side that had to be around forty miles apart from each other. The sun was interestingly low in the sky, making the time appear to be about five or six in the afternoon rather than an hour after noon. The grass and greenery could not have appeared healthier, and off in the distance directly ahead were the Glistening Plateaus, the massive Sierra Waterscape, and even more fields. The mountains themselves appeared to be littered with gardens from the base to below the tip. Whenever clouds passed by the sun, they were brilliantly illuminated by the shining golden rays.

Bowser scanned the area as he determined, "Due to the now

glaringly apparent lack of road – and I mean no road whatsoever, not even a dirt road – we're leaving the Offroader here."

"Seems like an alright idea," Athelstan said while looking over his notes. "We should be to the southwest of the Light Shrine at this spot."

"Bowser, you seem much more relaxed lately," Warra said. "Like you've released a whole lot of pent up tension."

"It's nothing important," the Moirai of Fire said. "I just feel pretty good. I haven't felt like this in a while, to be honest."

"That's great to hear," Warra replied with a smile. Rosalina suddenly materialized before them as an astral clone, prompting the attention of all the elemental wielders.

"I apologize for my haste last night," said the Elder of the Cosmos. "We were having quite a busy time yesterday at the Comet Observatory trying to deflect a meteor away from one of our satellite stations."

"Don't worry about it, Grand Elder," said Warra. "We made out quite well."

"Air and ice are both back to normal," said Daisy. "Back to their normal states."

"Excellent work," said Rosalina. "You should be proud of everything that you've done. That goes for all of you, but especially for you Daisy."

"What? Me?" Daisy quietly responded in surprise. "Why me?"

"You've taken by far the most damage out of anyone here," said Rosalina. "And you were never fighting at full health. Yet you're still standing here, *and* you have unlocked the Nova Form."

"Forgive me Grand Elder, but I'm not entirely sure what this 'Nova Form' thing is," Daisy said, puzzled.

"It is a state achieved within your body in which all your power is

able to flow within you unimpeded," said Rosalina. "As such, your elemental capacity and your energy are able to fully meld together as one and produce a kind of hyper state within the body. The Nova Form is the manifestation of your unity with your element."

"Awesome..." Marut cooed.

"Oh, I don't think I was too aware of it then," Daisy replied.

Rosalina's face expressed confusion from the earth wielder's statement. "I'm sorry; what exactly do you mean by that?"

"Well, it just sorta, I don't know, happened I guess," the Moirai of Earth responded. "I wasn't even aware that any such thing even existed."

"You may have entered the form unconsciously then," Rosalina said. "But do you remember what it felt like?"

"Yeah, a little," Daisy said. "I mean, I do, but I can't describe it."

"That's fine," the Cosmic Queen replied. "All you have to do is remember that feeling. That is the key to entering the form at will."

"You gotta try to tell us how you did it so that we can use it too," Bowser said to Daisy.

"No, she must not!" Rosalina quickly snapped. The group was taken aback by the sudden shift in tone from her, a shift towards a tone that not a single one of the Moirai had ever recalled hearing from her before. "It's enough strain on the body for those who are capable of handling it just trying to sustain it! If you try to enter Nova Form without the necessary power in your body, your body will break down and waste away and you won't achieve the form at all."

"Steep penalty, huh?" Athelstan commented.

"What are you saying, granny?" Bowser asked the Elder of the Cosmos.

"Nova Form is seen as the pinnacle of elemental power and prowess," Rosalina said. "Consequently, you must have the

prerequisite amount of power within your body for you to be able to transform. The power needed is exceedingly high, so it takes a lot of effort and time to reach a point where your body can not only tolerate the form but also sustain and optimize it. Those naturally born with vast energy reserves are the ones that are most capable of handling the Nova Form, but throughout history, those have been few and far between."

Daisy suddenly remembered Terran's words and immediately formed a connection. *I can sense that you have untapped reserves that you never even knew existed,* his voice echoed through her mind. *It had to be given time to develop and you had to become strong enough to be able to tolerate that power.* Was Terran referring to the Nova Form?

"So what's so great about Nova Form anyways?" Athelstan asked with intrigue.

"Nova Form grants you a substantial boost in all your attributes," Rosalina explained. "An elemental wielder in Nova Form may also near instantly materialize and utilize their element regardless of their environment. This is able to bypass the issues that normal elemental wielders have in trying to use their element in a place that's devoid of it. They won't have to use up the precious time usually needed to materialize their element, but they will still burn the same amount of energy they would have burned in their normal state and they still have to deal with field disadvantages. However, to offset these weaknesses, your range of control of your element is vastly expanded, and you are able to pull elementals from great distances. Be aware that the greater the distance you are pulling from, the more energy you expend."

Athelstan crossed his arms. "Now that sounds like a major improvement!"

"Yeah – that means I should be able to create crystal near instantly if that's the case," Daisy said with calm enthusiasm.

"What's considerably more impressive, however, is your management of the Nova Form," the Elder of the Cosmos added.

"How so?" Daisy asked. "I mean, how could I have managed it when I wasn't even aware that I was in it?"

"That may be why you were able to manage it so well," said Rosalina. "Though I'm certain that your control of it was mostly a result of your character. You see, the transformation itself seems to invoke a sort of, primal, mental state as a result of the link with nature that is established. Of the small amount of elemental wielders that have actually been able to achieve this state, the vast majority end up committing heinous acts or doing something that they end up regretting for life on their first transformation alone. Such experiences stick with them, and as a result, they shun the form altogether, fearing the loss of control, the loss of their sanity, the loss of their judgment, and the loss of their own selves."

"You're kidding!" Daisy exclaimed.

"Forgive me, Grand Elder, but that just sounds outrageous!" Andrew said in disbelief.

"There's actually been debate in the past few years over whether or not the transformation should be banned," Rosalina continued. "There are many that actually want to consider it an immoral ability. Such a ruling would render the Nova Form forbidden."

If that's the case, then should I take a risk using it again? Daisy said in her mind. *Is it worth it?*

"Is the form really that bad?" Warra asked.

Rosalina spoke with the utmost seriousness in her tone. "I could probably count on my two hands the amount of people over the centuries that have been able to be in the Nova Form with success and without repercussion."

"Unreal... " Bowser said under his breath.

"So you're saying I'm either going to lose control of myself or commit a galactic infarction?" Daisy heatedly asked.

"Don't worry too much about it," said the Elder of the Cosmos. "I'm sure I could propose exceptions to be made should such a ruling

ever come to fruition. Your unlocking of the Nova Form will prove to be a valuable asset that we cannot afford to have restricted, and as I have said before, your kind of character seems able to handle the Nova Form just as well as your body has. Even if you don't believe that now, I assure you that you'll be able to tolerate it fine."

The Moirai of Earth grimaced with intensity despite Rosalina's assurance. *No... If I lose control of myself and make the slightest mistake in Nova Form, I'll essentially be no better than my father,* Daisy thought. *I will not allow that to happen, and if that means never transforming again, then fine.*

"Let us now redirect our focus to the remaining work that must be done," said Rosalina. "You are all now in the light region of the continent. This area, The Great Valley, is the only way to get to the Light Shrine because the shrine itself is surrounded on both sides by high-altitude mountain ranges that converge on each other just north of the shrine. You'll find that in this part of the world, the sun is almost always seen as it would be in other parts of the world that are in their late afternoon and evening hours. Its golden hue eternally glistens the landscape, able to warm the area with its glow without the harsh rays that would result if the sun was directly overhead."

Ramona smiled. "For a region that has experienced light corruption, this area looks much more like a heavenly sanctuary than a hellish world."

"And that is the other reason I wanted us to discuss the mission here instead of back at the Ice Shrine," said Rosalina. "You'll find that the corruption of the light and shadow elements has become much more lethal than the previous elements. Light and shadow's corruption is comparable to that of stone's corruption before you were able to remedy that disorder."

"What exactly have been the effects?" Athelstan asked, puzzled. "Because as Ramona said, this area here seems to be the definition of calm."

"The effects are rather opportunistic," Rosalina responded. "Light rays from the sun have been incredibly erratic and inconsistent, and have been increasing in intensity as the corruption of light has

progressed. Although the other elements expanded outwards from the shrines during their corruption, this is the one element where the effects of its corruption are manifesting on a galactic scale. The radiation from the sun is at a safe point for now, hence, there have been no immediate effects. However, I believe by the evening hours of today – which is relatively soon – the rays will become a lethal hazard and start to eat away at not only the surface of this region but everywhere else in the world that is exposed to the sun."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Andrew asked.

"The rays from the sun will destroy the magnetic field of the planet," Rosalina said. "Solar radiation will then be able to rain down to the surface at full force, causing widespread mutations with unpredictable effects on all lifeforms."

"Worst-case scenario, the planet as a whole gets turned into a wasteland," Ramona concluded. "Literally."

"Precisely," Rosalina affirmed. "This is merely the calm before the storm, because, as was said before, the effects of the corruption of light are opportunistic. So before the integrity of the magnetic field is compromised, the light element must be purified. I would say you have about six hours, which should be plenty of time."

"Right," said Marut. "We'll be able to take care of the Light Shrine no problem!"

"The shadow element has been more direct and especially bad," Rosalina continued. "The Shadow Shrine is on the outskirts of the very lively city of Senka. Unfortunately, the city has taken the brunt of the corruption of shadow. Most notably, increasing amounts of people have complained of insomnia and have been seeing strange visions and illusions that were never there to begin with. Mania has been sprouting up and fear is spreading throughout Senka's people, especially considering that there have been several deaths resulting from people trying to run away or 'fight' the illusions that they saw."

"That's unfortunate," Andrew replied. "More than unfortunate; it's quite disturbing."

"As a consequence, it'd be in the best interests of the world if you all split up and handle both shrines at the same time," Rosalina proposed. "I'm sure Ramona and Andrew can create the necessary portal to allow transport to Senka."

"Provided they actually know where they're bridging the portal to..." Bowser mumbled.

"Oh, you don't gotta worry about that this time around!" Andrew assured.

"Do we have to split? Why can't we stay as a whole?" Ramona whimpered.

"Ramona, when we finish here, we'll just catch up, okay?" said Athelstan. "Don't stress out about a thing! It'll all get done real quick!"

"Yeah, just because Grekka is gone doesn't mean the team is falling apart!" Marut added.

"Yes, what happened to your icy member?" Rosalina asked. "I noticed he was absent when I appeared before you."

After a moment of silence from the Moirai, Daisy said, "...We don't know."

"...I see..." said Rosalina. "Though, you must not let it be a distraction from your mission."

"And yet, I can't help but wonder where he went, and why..." Daisy murmured. "I hope he's alright, and that he knows that he's welcome to return at any time..."

"We can't dwell on him," Bowser asserted. "He abandoned the team, so he's on his own now. That was his decision to make, and he made it, not us. He has his path that he's going down, and we have ours. So, who's going to which shrine?"

"Right off the bat, we know that Ramona has to go to the Light Shrine and Andrew to the Shadow Shrine," said Warra.

"I'll go to the Shadow Shrine," Daisy declared.

"Bowser, you and I can accompany Ramona," Athelstan suggested.

"And Marut and I can go with Daisy and Andrew," said Warra.

Ramona and Andrew moved away from the group and stood together in the stance they used for creating dimensional portals. Since they did not have to rush, they were able to lock on to the city of Senka and create the portal that would lead there without issue.

"We put a timer on this portal," said Andrew. "It will automatically disband in a few minutes so we don't have any zany situations. And yes; we know where we bridged it to!"

"You must now go to a place where the Sun never shines," Rosalina said to Daisy, Warra, Marut, and Andrew as the four moved towards the portal. "It is the one region in the world where the sun has not shown in over two thousand years. The dawn goes straight to dusk with nothing in between."

"Look for a large and open field that spreads out high above the rest of the land to the east of Senka," Athelstan told Daisy. "It is only accessible by traveling through the city from the west."

"You are all now on the latter portion of your quest," said Rosalina. "The challenges become evermore difficult, but you must continue to pull through. Now more than ever, you are entrusted with the fate of this world. Godspeed to you all; I will be watching from above." At the conclusion of her words, her astral clone dispersed.

"We'll go on ahead now to the Shadow Shrine, and leave the Light Shrine in your hands," said Daisy. "You guys keep the Dimensional Mirror so you can use it at the Light Shrine. When you catch up, then we'll use it at the Shadow Shrine."

A swift and ethereal breeze blew through that seemed to split so that wind flowed both in the direction of the Light Shrine and towards Ramona and Andrew's portal. After an exchange of good wishes, Daisy went through the portal, followed by Warra, Marut, and Andrew. Bowser, Athelstan, and Ramona then turned to face The

Great Valley once more and started their trek towards the Light Shrine.

During the day, The Northernmost West somehow always felt colder than it did at night and in the morning. In the small town of Kareah, population now zero after Kokoro's murderous rampage, Grekka sat up against his home with his knees in his arms. The Soul Stealer had tore through the area with minimal damage done to the buildings, though Grekka knew that the only reason Kokoro left the town relatively untouched was because the fiend was only concerned with the acquisition of the souls of Kareah's inhabitants. Although Bowser burned the Scroll of Souls, thus freeing the countless captured spirits that were bound to the paper, including the souls of Kareah's population, Grekka had not given the entrapped souls any second thought.

"You feared me when I was in front of your eyes, then mocked and berated me when I was gone from your vision..." Grekka mumbled in the silence. The only sounds that could be heard besides his soft voice were the chilling and intermittent polar easterlies. "How much I had to endure from you sick bastards, all of you..."

The whistling that carried through the air was the natural equivalent of a call from a spectre that had lost its way.

"Why didn't you all face me when you had the chance instead of shying away from me when you were alone, only to gang up on me later when you were all together?"

The wind caused small snowdrifts to brush up along the tall and silver buildings.

"All you insipid tools who called me a girl; I didn't choose my body. Too bad if my figure's too 'feminine' for you. I didn't make it that way, but you act like it's my fault, then run away as if I'm going to bite your head off." The breeze brushed up against Grekka's hair and uncovered his face for a moment as it swept through the ground. "Hypocrisy proves ignorance... Even now, I see you flinch right before my eyes; you freeze when I draw near..."

Subtle footsteps made sounds in the thin line of snow.

"Why would I want to take control of all you sad people..." Grekka murmured without emotion. "I hope you all rot and burn in Hell."

"…Zima-Jokull... " a different voice softly reverberated.

"...So tired of being alone..." Grekka muttered. "But I know I'm not hearing things." He turned his head to the right and saw Elkon standing five feet away from him.

"You are not with the others," the dark being said. "It should've been that way from the start. Let me ask; why side with them in the first place?"

"...What do you mean," the ice wielder questioned with caution.

"They're not your friends," Elkon asserted. "Do you not realize what they're fighting for? They're your enemies. They're trying to save the fates of those that have caused you so much torment. Humans have brought about your suffering, I'm sure you're well aware of that. It's unfortunate how easily and carelessly mankind can put a fellow man down, but such is the way of the human race. You may be one of the few enlightened humans on this planet since you have fallen victim to the cruelty of mankind first hand, have you not?"

Grekka didn't respond to Elkon, and only managed to turn his head back around. There was so much uncertainty now coming to light and flooding his mind that he was at a loss for words.

"You and I are not too different Grekka," Elkon continued. "We have both endured hardships that were the result of the malevolence of mankind, so why have you helped them to stand against me when I'm trying to right the wrong that man has created on this planet?"

"...I don't know..." Grekka muttered. "It was a way to get away from here, to get away from all these people here. My existence here was painful... It still is...and it always will be."

"Ah, but you see, it doesn't have to be that way," Elkon gently insisted. "I have a way for you to end all your pains..."

Grekka slowly perked up and tilted his head so that he was looking at Elkon. "Is that so?"

Elkon pulled out from a pocket in his robe a black metal choker with a large, pink jewel attached to its center. "All you must do is side with me and help me in accomplishing my goal of ridding the world of everything that is causing so much evil and pain."

"...What is that?" the ice wielder asked, his voice slightly cracking. The accessory seemed to be speaking to him, calling to him...longing for him.

"It's the Master Pendant..." Elkon said, extending his arm to Grekka. "Go on... Take it..."

Grekka did not react for a few moments, but he mysteriously felt compelled to take the pendant from Elkon's outstretched arm and position it around his neck. The jewel glistened, as if it was trying to grin.

"Eradicate all those that have caused you pain," the dark figure echoed. "And all those, who are supporters of your enemies." He turned away and waved his hand to create a dimensional portal, then turned back around to help Grekka get to his feet. The ice wielder said nothing, but stood tall and nodded with a grim expression full of hatred.

"Come now," said Elkon, gesturing to the portal. "There is much that must be done."

Chapter XXVIII

The Shrines of Light and Shadow :

Underneath the golden rays of the sun, Ramona, Bowser, and Athelstan cut through the expansive valley, ran through the Golden Dales, passed by the massive Sierra Waterscape, continued through the lively fields, scaled the mountain gardens, and then finally platformed across the Shining Plateaus. The three Moirai of Light, Fire, and Stone then came to a colossal wall with a pair of large double doors and the light symbol positioned at either side. The great wall continued and appeared to stretch the entire length of space between the mountain ranges. Seeing that the only way to proceed any further was to go through the large double doors, they did just that.

The entryway on the other side of the great doors was a large and spacious cave-like building. The brown, tan, and bronze floors and hallways were clearly man-made, but the uneven ceiling and walls were made of some sort of golden translucent material that the three Moirai could not identify. Oddly enough, the glowing material appeared to somehow be organic in nature. The appearance of the shrine seemed much more spiritual than the previous shrines, and seemed to be about the same age as the Stone Shrine.

"You know," Athelstan began. "I never imagined the Light Shrine would look so..."

"Alive?" Bowser suggested. "Like we're walking inside its organs and we don't know if we're going to end up where the Light Gemstone is or just end up in its stomach where we'll be digested?"

"Thanks for putting that image in my mind," Ramona jokingly muttered. "You just ruined the whole shrine for me."

"Hey, I didn't design this place," Bowser replied. "Whoever made the Light Shrine resemble an anatomy lesson – poorly at that – should've probably thought it over a bit more."

"Actually, I was going to say that this place looked very...organic," said Athelstan.

"I see what you mean," Ramona said. "But it shouldn't have much of an impact on where we're going, should it? I won't question the layout of the building or the architects and their reasons."

With the sun from outside illuminating through the translucent ceiling, the three elemental wielders maneuvered through the cascading and spacious hallways. Several rooms and hallways into the complex, they came across another set of large double doors. These doors led outside, where the shrine opened up into a lake that must have been about two miles in diameter and that housed several slopeless pieces of tall land near the center that stretched several hundred feet into the air. Each of the pieces of land appeared to be connected by an intricate system of bridges, but the Moirai were too far away to be able to tell for sure. Behind all the masses of vertical land was an exceptionally wide waterfall that fed into the lake, and yet the waterfall was still only about an average of two-thirds the height of the varied heights of the thin and towering masses of land spread out in front of it.

When they looked around, they realized that the land that they were on was the only piece of ground level land on that side of the Light Shrine. The lake diverged into two separate rivers that split to the left and right and could be seen feeding into caves underneath the mountains off in the distance. The only logical conclusion that could be made was that both rivers fed into the Sierra Waterscape that they had passed through on their way to the Light Shrine.

"Well Bowser, I guess you can't say that the Light Shrine's a life-size cross section of a Rex anymore, can you?" said Ramona.

"Or maybe, this place is," Bowser pondered aloud. "Maybe not of a Rex, obviously, but-"

"The heart of The Great Valley?" Athelstan guessed. "Or maybe, the heart of the entire planet?"

"We can speculate later; we still have a certain gemstone we need to get to," said Ramona. "My guess is that we have to get up to the

tops of those massive pillars; it's the only place that we can go."

"And it looks like that up ahead is the means of transport to said pillars," stated Bowser.

In front of them was a short bridge that stretched out into the lake where a large cable car system and cable car were set up to allow for transport between the ground level and the large landmasses. Once they figured out how to work the controls, they got in the cable car and were carried out into the lake and upwards towards the sky. The cable car brought them to a point about three-quarters of the way up the closest landmass. When they got off, they saw that each of the towering masses of land were littered with bridges, stairs, walkways, and even small, scattered buildings. To the north, they saw a grander bridge leading into another pair of double doors that were the entrance to what appeared to be a building built into the top of the widest of the naturally formed towers.

"The gemstone room must be over there," said Bowser.

"It better be," Athelstan replied. "I doubt they would put just anything in a place that size."

The three fighters ventured across the various bridges and natural towers to get to the grand bridge and the double doors that awaited. When they walked up to the doors, they saw that there were two large glass lenses on both of the top corners of the large door frame. The lenses seemed to be built in a way that implied that they were aimed at some sort of light-activated mechanism within the walls. Ramona shot beams of light from both her hands that passed through each of the lenses and appeared to magnify in intensity upon contact as it flowed into the walls and caused an audible reaction from within. After a few moments, the double doors started fanning open to allow entry.

"Please be careful you guys," Ramona warned. "There's no telling who we'll be up against or what kind of power we'll have to deal with on the other side of these doors..."

"Whoever's on the other side should be careful about dealing with us!" Athelstan asserted.

Upon passing through the doorway, they saw that the interior was almost exactly like the interior of the first part of the Light Shrine. The only difference was that the gemstone room was one voluminous and elliptical room similar to the various other gemstone rooms they had encountered in their travels. As such, they stood once again on brown shades of cobblestone and brick, and were surrounded by the glistening golden ceiling and walls above. On the other side of the room opposite the double doors, the Light Gemstone rested in its regal pedestal. No guardian was anywhere to be seen, but a large portal suddenly appeared above the gemstone pedestal through which Elkon emerged. The dark fiend floated forward to levitate in front of the Light Gemstone before disbanding the portal.

"What's wrong; did you run out of enlistments?" Bowser mocked. "...Or did we scare them off?"

"Funny..." Elkon responded. "That's too funny... Unfortunately, you won't be saying that when you see what I have in store for you here."

"You mean, nothing?" Athelstan asked.

"Guys, I think you should hold your speech a bit better," Ramona cautiously suggested. "He's no pushover."

"So he's a pullover?" Athelstan joked.

At that moment, Elkon recognized Ramona and remembered their previous encounter. "Ah, you," he began. "So you did get away that day. You're going to pay for infiltrating my tower."

"Elkon's got a tower?" Bowser asked the Moirai of Light. "Oh, that's right. You did mention that on the way here, didn't you?"

"Yes," Ramona answered, unsheathing her rapier. "Which is why I know what I meant when I said that he's no pushover."

"Where's that darker fellow of yours?" Elkon demanded to know. "You only got away because of his illusion trick. But since he's not here...you don't have a safety net this time."

Ramona's lip quivered and sweat began to bead on her head as she gripped her rapier ever tighter. Bowser and Athelstan did not share the same feelings of frightful dread.

"Rest assured, you will be taken out quickly," said Elkon. "I cannot have my plans being compromised any further because of your meddling. But, I must be brutally honest; I was sure that even if you had somehow managed to get past Vodyanoy, that Nukpana and Kokoro both would've been able to clean up the remains of your team...so how do you think I felt when I realized that six of the eight elements had been returned to their natural state?"

"I don't know – stupid?" Athelstan guessed with a shrug.

"NO!" Elkon boomed as he threw his hands down, causing the shadow of his hood to fade away and reveal his face. "Infuriated! Exasperated! ABSOLUTELY LIVID!"

"So I was right?" said Athelstan.

"Be quiet!" Ramona whispered.

"But you know what," Elkon went on, returning to calm once more. "Part of it was my fault. The most powerful warrior of my group of henchmen at the time was indeed Kokoro, so I automatically assumed that he would not be beaten. And yet, here we are..."

Bowser and Athelstan both readied themselves for combat along with Ramona, all of whom sensed something had abruptly shifted out of place in the atmosphere.

"And here, your journey ends," Elkon solemnly concluded, his eyes narrowing in intensity.

Daisy, Warra, Marut, and Andrew had emerged from the dimensional portal on the outskirts of the city of Senka, a landlocked metropolis built along a river that flowed southward. They had dashed through the city to get to the open field on the other side that would lead to the Shadow Shrine. The group was now walking underneath the moonlit sky through the spacious field and the

healthful trees scattered about. Even though the moon gave a brilliant glow to the land, Daisy and Andrew both lead the way as a precautionary measure since they both could see clearly in dark places.

"Man, I could really use some Mushrooms right about now," Daisy thought aloud. "I *really* don't feel all too well from the past couple days. I don't know why I didn't think to get some from Mario when we first started out."

"Mushrooms?" Warra asked.

"They're like your healing water, but able to heal more," Daisy replied.

"I'll have to look into those when I get a chance," the Moirai of Water said.

"I actually thought I was going to be filled with fright and terror walking through a place like this," said Marut. "But really, this place ain't bad at all!"

"There's a real problem with shadow having a negative connotation," said Andrew. "Unless they're an earth or shadow wielder, people can't see in the dark, causing them to feel vulnerable and automatically panic as they start to assume danger is near. Shadows are associated with loss of vision, and therefore humans see it as occlusion, as something that cuts off all clarity and direction. With that said, it's no coincidence how it can be seen as an evil thing."

The region's perpetual night was pleasant and comfortable. There was virtually no commotion interfering with the tranquil environment. As they continued making their way towards the Shadow Shrine, they went past a fox who was curled up underneath a tree in slumber.

"Well that doesn't look evil at all," Daisy whispered as they continued walking.

"Shadow is a beautiful thing," Andrew said. "It is infinite, whereas

light is finite. Where light burns out, shadow is everlasting. It is a sanctuary of calmness and ease. If you can learn to trust the darkness, you'll realize there is nothing to fear. It is just the absence of light, and you'll realize that much like a child learns to not fear the dark when it's time to go to sleep. You can't label an aspect all-encompassingly as evil; it is all behind the intention, for what is used for good is good, and what is used for bad becomes bad. It turns out that, just like how oftentimes dark is not evil, light is not guaranteed to be good. Some will view the light itself as natural, and darkness as nothing more than an absence of it. Others will see light as a destructive force, a perversion of the infinite darkness. It's all in the person's perspective. I see the shadows as a sanctuary through which I can meditate in."

"You know what; Necromancer and Kokoro both were light wielders," stated Warra. "And I don't think I need to say anything more about what we had to deal with regarding them."

"So how well do you and Ramona get along?" Marut asked. "You both came to the Ice Shrine together, so does that mean you two are related?"

"Ramona's my best friend," Andrew said. "We're both nineteen years old and we knew each other since we were seven. We grew up together and we practically did everything together too, and still do, really. I just happen to have a natural affinity for shadow, just as she has an affinity for light. And yet, with those differences, the average person would think Ramona and I are mortal enemies."

"Then by that logic, Daisy and I should be mortal enemies then!" Marut thought aloud.

"Huh, I guess that would be right, wouldn't it?" Daisy asked as she roped her arm round Marut's neck and rubbed a fist in his double tassel hat.

"The shadows just happen to attract a lot of bad guys is all," Andrew said. "Darkness, itself, is neither good or evil, and neither is light. They're just sources of power. Any source of great power can corrupt, and one can lose their humanity if their heart is too weak or if they go too far. It's just that shadow might be easier to lose control

of given it's nature and advantages that people are more prone to abuse. Have you never noticed how destructive fire can be? What about all the water in the world? A group of water wielders could plot to create countless tsunamis across the globe and bring about mass devastation. And light? Just look directly into the sun and you'll be blinded for life; and that's just nature being nature. With every element, it is all about the intention."

"That makes all the sense in the world, now that I think about it," said Warra.

"Yeah," Andrew replied. "Otherwise you all would've been writhing in pain and despair on the ground long before we even started this quest because of me."

"So why are the effects of the corruption of shadow so...startlingly severe?" Warra asked. "I mean, people who have gone mad and killed others because of visions and illusions sounds pretty bad."

"Shadow represents all that is unknown, unexpressed, or repressed in, of, and around us," Andrew answered. "The shadows contain our unlived dreams, and our potential for the full range of human individuality and creativity."

"I don't think I quite get what you mean," the Moirai of Water replied.

"Well, allow me to demonstrate on you then, Warra," Andrew said, focusing his shadow energies into the air around them. The group stopped walking to allow the Moirai of Shadow to perform his technique. By calling on the advanced form of shadow, Andrew cast a wall of darkness in front of Warra. "Because of the nature of this technique, I am able to predetermine who is affected by it. So since this is just for you, I have made it so that Daisy, Marut, and I will not be able to see or experience what you will. Stare deeply into this wall of shadows for a little while. Put all your focus and concentration into it."

Warra did as Andrew instructed, putting all his attention towards the dark wall. As was expected, Daisy and Marut watched but were not able to see what suddenly faded into Warra's vision after several moments of peering into the shadows. The form of a beautiful

woman in a regal dress became visible and stared Warra down with longing eyes. At first, he was utterly dumbfounded to see her come into view, but then was amazed as she seemed to become ever more tangible to the point where he was certain that she was real and actually standing in front of him.

Warra, I miss you... he heard her say. *Warra...why did you leave me...*

Warra gasped as he staggered away in shock, at which point Andrew rescinded his shadows. The Moirai of Water was visibly sweating as his face had lightened just a shade.

"Now you see what I mean," said Andrew. "And that was just one facet of what you have kept repressed."

"You alright, bro?" Marut asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost!" He paused, then added, "Unless you did?! What did you see?"

Warra, with a stressed out expression, responded, "I'm fine. Just saw something – someone, rather. Never mind it..."

Wow, Daisy thought with some worry. *What's that supposed to mean?*

"Now imagine everyone seeing their personal equivalent to what you saw," said Andrew. "And imagine that they saw it just as, if not more vividly to the point where they can't help but believe that it's real. The shadows are a reflection of ourselves; our wants, our needs, our desires, our very essence... Our brain can create illusions out of the shadows on nothing but pure fear and anxiety, but it also works in reverse. Our brains can create our greatest longings as illusions. Our longings; the things – or people – we desire to see the most, the people we desire to reclaim that we have lost, things we strive to attain but always seem to be out of reach...all can weigh heavy on our mind, distorting the lines between reality and illusion, if only for a moment. The more precious those longings are to us, the more willing we are to create the illusion that they are still there. Sometimes you actually convince yourself that the illusions you see are truly real. If only for a moment, you are able to ease these longings. And then when it's time to come back to actuality, you

become aware once more that it was all just an illusion...a distraction from a harsh reality."

Warra bowed his head as his mind began to drift back to the image of the woman he saw, but then quickly pulled himself back together. "We should keep moving," he urged.

After trekking some more distance across the open field, the four gained sight of the Shadow Shrine, a large, roofless building that appeared to be elliptical in design. Judging by the breadth of the outer wall of the shrine, the building's diameter had to be a little less than a half of a mile. The shrine's dark gray outer walls of stone and earth were lined with trees, though the entrance was clear of vegetation. The shadow symbol was displayed clearly on the great entryway that was sealed off by black double doors. In the distance off to the left side of the shrine, lunar light illuminated the pitch dark trees and gave them a faint shine. The whole area seemed to give off an ethereal glow, as owls soared through the sky and took up perch on the tree tops for an overview of the land. The silhouettes of deer were lively trotting through the brush.

"Huh; this shrine really doesn't feel so sinister," Marut commented. "Not at all actually."

"Yeah," said Andrew. "Most people view shadow as just that – sinister. However, if you take the time to look at it, to feel it, to embrace it, you can see that it has a serene beauty about it. In a way it's just like light. It just looks different."

"But don't think that means that this shrine will be any more lenient than any of the others," Daisy said to the group as a whole. "The guardian here will have just as much incentive to guard the elements as the rest of them did, I'm sure."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Andrew.

The four Moirai walked up to the doors, but were startled to see that the doors didn't have any sort of handles or special mechanisms. In fact, the black doors were completely flat.

"So what's up here?" Marut asked. "Did we go the wrong way? Are

these those stupid doors that you can only open from the inside?"

"I hate those so much, it's not even funny," Daisy muttered. "It's like, what's the point of those?"

"Maybe we should walk around to find another entrance," Warra suggested.

"Hold on, these aren't doors..." Andrew said in quick response. He motioned to put his hand on the door, only to find that his hand managed to effortlessly pass through it. "...It's a wall of shadows!" He channeled his shadow energy to see if the black "doors" would respond, and sure enough, they stretched and expanded outwards. He then used his abilities to sweep aside and disband the darkness to reveal a short tunnel that led to the interior of the Shadow Shrine.

"Those were some pretty convincing shadows," Daisy thought aloud.

"To the untrained eyes," Andrew replied. "But I must admit, whoever erected that wall of darkness did it *perfectly* . I didn't even pick up on it at first."

The four fighters walked through the short tunnel and emerged from the entryway on the other side, now standing within the Shadow Shrine. Several small and patterned neon lightstones of red, blue, yellow, and green hung on the many walls of the building. The shrine had two levels, but the exterior walls only wrapped around the first level and only parts of the second level. Much of the second level was left without boundary, and although the ground level was tall, a vast majority of the ground level had no ceiling. Overall, the Shadow Shrine looked unfinished, yet it looked complete and whole at the same time.

"You know, shadow really is such a beautiful thing," Daisy said as they made their way through the many hallways and rooms of the Shadow Shrine. "Why do so many malevolent beings use it for such evil and nasty purposes?"

"What people don't know, they tend to fear," Andrew said. "People fear the unknown, and so malevolent forces like to prey on this fear. The shadows provide a sheath of concealment, and people are

unable to tell what lies within when it's too dark. Unless you have the night vision of an animal or that which an earth or shadow wielder has, then your sense of sight is rendered useless, and you can't see a thing. It's a primal instinct really, because the predator has the advantage if the prey can't detect where the attacker is coming from. The dark provides protection against the enemy in the same way it can provide concealment for the enemy. It is primal too for nighttime and darkness to bring a time of rest, rejuvenation, and relaxation. Not only that, but when you're in the shadows, there's nothing else there but you and the darkness. This pitch black nothingness is able reflect your state of mind, causing many people to have to face themselves, to evaluate themselves and find that there are things about themselves they never liked but never wanted to own up to and confront. With the manifestations of these troubles within the mind, more fear is added. And the truly twisted will use the shadows as illusions to further incite fear; illusions of the most unpleasant things, both as a result of the elemental manipulation and as a result of the victim's mind projecting their fears into reality out of pure insecurity. It is for those reasons that shadow is not only arguably one of the most powerful elements but also the easiest and most convenient element to use for their purposes."

"For someone your age, you are quite wise," said Warra. "I would have never thought that there was so much to the shadow element or that it ran so deeply."

"It comes as a consequence, though," the Moirai of Shadow replied. "The world doesn't take too kindly to us shadow wielders. There's a lot of unfair prejudice and stereotypes that are mostly a result of the very same fear that I had just mentioned. So we pretty much live and breathe in the hatred that others cast down upon us. We're all just some of the most misunderstood beings in this world of ours. One of my greatest wishes is for people to realize that there's no need to vilify or villainize the shadows, nor should they feel the need to run from the darkness. There are eight elements and they're all paired to coexist. Light and dark must exist; you cannot have one without the other."

"If there's anyone who'd be able to usher in that kind of a change, it would be you," Daisy assured. "It definitely won't be easy to manage

at all though."

"But an achievable goal for quite the idealist; and quite the visionary," added Warra.

The group of four headed through the Shadow Shrine in an erratic pattern, finding that they had to backtrack much more frequently than in the previous shrines. Once on the second floor, they had to do a substantial amount of platforming in order to progress further through the shrine. In one section, they had to carefully and attentively leap across blue, red, green, and yellow neon platforms that switched their tangibility in said order to a preset rhythm.

Aside from a few extra specialized characteristics and variations in structure, the Shadow Shrine stayed consistent with the previous shrines. The gemstone pedestal could be seen on the northern end of a large, circular flat arena in the center of the upper floor that was bordered by a slightly elevated, thin stone walkway. The four Moirai continued maneuvering across the tricky platforms and mildly scarce grounded floor of the upper level until they were able to make a pathway to the southern end of the center arena where the Shadow Gemstone rested. The large circular floor they touched down on that could have easily held at least sixty Piantas was a series of neon lightstones underneath a Plexiglas sheath that covered black tiles, making a variety of patterns on the walkable surface. There was a faint glow coming from the many lights under the Plexiglas, and the four Moirai looked like they weren't even standing on solid ground because of the black tiles that the lights rested on. The lightstones were arranged in a rainbow gradient that almost seemed to faintly flash under the moonlight, but what caught the attention of the four elemental wielders was not the stunning ambience of the arena.

"There's nobody here!" Daisy shouted.

"This gemstone has been left unguarded..." Andrew murmured. "Why would Elkon not care to leave a guardian with this one?"

"Maybe he gave up?" Marut innocently guessed.

"No," Daisy muttered. "He wouldn't just give up...not like this..."

"...This can only mean one thing..." Warra said under his breath.

Chapter XXIX

Challenge of the Moirai :

"Seeing as how you'll all have to be tended to with special care, I dismissed the guardians that formerly here in the Light Shrine as well as in the Shadow Shrine," Elkon announced to Ramona, Bowser, and Athelstan. "They were not as powerful as Kokoro, and although I still don't know how you managed to defeat him, I can't afford to take any chances with subpar guardians. These two shrines are not just the only remaining ones in my control, but also the most crucial."

"Too bad!" Athelstan snapped. "You're not gonna be in control of any shrine after today is over!"

"How a team of inexperienced rookies bested my guardians will elude me forever," Elkon groused. "But no matter; you have all had your fun now. Revel in it while you can, for it is all about to come to a screeching halt!"

"Please, elaborate on how you expect to accomplish that," said Bowser.

"Guys, really!" Ramona harshly whispered. "Show some restraint!"

"Yes," said Elkon. "The least you can do is show some respect to this ancient civilization."

"What do you mean?" asked Bowser.

"The Light Shrine is not only the resting place of the Light Gemstone, but also the former citadel of a great civilization of ancients," said Elkon. "These ancients were one of the most peaceful and thriving civilizations ever constructed in the past. However, some time before modernization, the inhabitants here mysteriously vanished along with all record of who they were. Their names have been lost in history, and no record of the reason for their disappearance was ever created. But these ancient peoples

were known to have a great connection with many realms, both of the living and of the dead. They knew that this area had special connections to realms beyond the one we exist in now, and were consistently in contact with spirits and souls that had passed on through powerful spells that they had created. As such, this area was and has been acknowledged as the closest region in the world to the afterlife, even more than the region where the Stone Shrine resides. The ancients here in the Great Valley knew that this was by far *the* bestplace on the planet for them to be able to bridge between realms...to access the gateway between life...and death..."

"Wait, where are you going with this?" Bowser asked, stepping back and raising an eyebrow.

Elkon raised an arm upwards. "You know, when one is revived, they tend to come back with an incomprehensible power increase through their time spent in the afterlife..."

"Revived..." Athelstan repeated to himself.

A dimensional portal suddenly appeared above Elkon that was three times the size of the dark being. From the portal, two different entities emerged; a large, nightmarish, batlike creature and an equally large Beanish in purple garb with an otherwise crazy expression on her face. Both showed equal malevolence in their expressions.

"...So I figured, why not bring two back?" Elkon finished. The portal closed behind the two now fully emerged beings whose identities managed to catch the full attention of a suddenly irate Bowser.

"Cackletta," the Koopa King growled. "And Antasma! I never thought I'd see either of you two again... I especially didn't want to have to see *you* again, you big, damn bean."

"Man, these two are ugly!" Athelstan thought aloud with a laugh.

"Thank you for bringing up Cackletta when you so rudely intruded in my sanctuary," Elkon said to Ramona, who cringed at the conclusion of his statement. The dark being then brought his hands together and forcefully separated them in unison to conjure a super

dense spherical mass of matter. With each passing second, the golf ball-sized mass seemed to become denser and denser. "They both had been itching to get another crack at Bowser here for quite a while. But then I also thought, why not then do this?" He then allowed the mass to drift upwards into the air.

The space around what had now become a tiny Gravitational Singularity violently distorted and warped as the mass ascended towards the area between Antasma and Cackletta. The two beings were pulled together into the ascending orb and began to meld and morph into one as a result of the insurmountable forces of the singularity. A large cloud of energy and matter burst forth from the melding bodies that temporarily obstructed the image of their fusion.

"Not impressed!" Athelstan called out over the multiple tones of humming from the cloud above. Elkon did not give any second thought to the Moirai of Stone's comment, instead keeping his gaze fixated on what was happening above.

From the cloud of bursting matter and energy, a new being was born. A colossal woman, four times the size of Bowser began to coalesce. The woman formed to resemble a youthful, godlike being, with long, flowing gold and purple hair that seemed to forever be animated. Her bright yellow body was covered in purple, black, and white robes. She levitated in the air with her legs crossed underneath her and concealed by the ends of her robes. Her shoulder and clavicle bones and joints extended outwards to look like large pads, her hands and arms strongly resembling Antasma's in shape and length. As a result of the fusion, the singularity which had become her core reversed polarity to negate the gravitational forces and sustain the newly born titan who now existed in place of Antasma and Cackletta. A thin golden aura outlined her entire form, though her piercing, menacing red eyes that were locked on each of the elemental wielders seemed to be a definitive giveaway that she was not on the side of the Moirai.

"So how well can you handle 'Deyanira the Dream Destroyer?' " Elkon echoed. "I guarantee you that she'll be able to wipe out all three of you at once."

"Be glad you're not a betting man," Athelstan replied, unlimbering his

halberd. "Still not impressed."

"Unreal," Ramona murmured. "How is a mortal able to transgress not only dimensions but the realms of the living and the dead..."

"You see," Elkon began. "If my powers were in the hands of someone who was actually malevolent, then this world would have perished long ago. I am the only human who is capable of wielding such abilities."

"But how?!" Ramona asked, as if pleading for the answer. "You can't be human with the abilities you've demonstrated thus far!"

"Oh, but I am...barely," Elkon asserted with calm. "I walk the fine line between human...and godly. The God of this extraordinary universe created the Great Beings and assigned to them each the task of constructing the several aspects of this plane of existence using the eight elements. In my past life, long ago when the universe was in its infancy, I brought about space by melding light and shadow together. So you see, I am the reincarnation of the creator of space. Granted, I was only aware of this through the realization of my ability to morph and distort space itself at an early age. As such, it is my duty to right the wrong that mankind has cast on this planet."

"It's our duty to stop you!" Athelstan countered while twirling the shaft of his halberd in his hands. "Something's gotta give..."

Ramona clutched the hilt of her rapier tighter and synced her elemental energy to her blade. Bowser flared his claws and puffed out a small cloud of smoke from his nose, eyeing down the titan who hovered before them. Deyanira raised her arms out in front of her and crossed them at her wrists, maliciously smirking. Elkon floated higher into the air to get himself out of the way of the impending battle.

Deyanira attacked right away, but did so in the most inconspicuous manner. Without warning, her eyes intensely flashed for a half a second. An equal partition of time later, the minds of Bowser, Ramona, and Athelstan all went blank as their thoughts were scrambled and their senses were shocked. Deyanira had not so much as moved from her spot in the air, and yet all three of the

Moirai were reeling about before her. Only after a few moments passed did the three elemental wielders regain their bearings.

"What was that?!" Bowser grunted. "Everything went blank!"

"I feel like I just got an instant migraine!" Athelstan exclaimed.

"...Mental Blast..." Deyanira said in a soft and provocative tone.

"Well isn't that just great!" Bowser griped.

"Okay, I'm impressed now," Athelstan mumbled in self-correction.

Deyanira let loose another Mental Blast that shattered their minds long enough for them to not notice the bolts of light and shadow that hit them. By the time the Moirai realized where they were, they were already on the ground.

"What just happened?" Athelstan asked. "Like, literally – what just happened?"

"I can't remember the last several seconds!" Ramona said in shock. "One moment we're standing, and then the next thing I know, we're all on the ground! Why do I feel like I got pelted by some sort of blast...?"

"Alright, you know what – *no* !" Bowser snarled at Deyanira. He flared a fireball and made a backhanded throw at the titan, eliciting a wicked curve on its trajectory as it started off wide right of Deyanira and careened its way back towards her with a tight curve. Just before the fireball made contact, she erected a wall of shadow to block the attack. Ramona took the opportunity to channel a portion of her light energy through her rapier and fire it off at Deyanira, but the titan swiftly countered with a shadow blast of equal power. As the blasts from Ramona and Deyanira collided with each other, Athelstan channeled his elemental energy through his halberd to lift a large piece of the floor from the ground up into the air. He sent it on a beeline towards Deyanira through the resulting cloud of residual elementals from the clash of the previous blasts. Even though Athelstan meant for the chunk of stone to be a surprise attack, Deyanira was ready and countered with a high-powered light

laser that zapped the rock into several smaller pieces.

"Wait a minute," Bowser said. "Did I just see that giant woman fire off both light *and* shadow?"

"Yes, you did," said Deyanira. She raised both arms; light energy charged in her left hand and shadow energy charged in her right hand.

"Oh that is so unfair..." Athelstan grumbled.

"The Mental Blast was unfair," Bowser added. "And she can fly! If this was a video game, I swear..."

"All's fair in hate and war, darlings," the soft-spoken Deyanira replied.

"It's comical to hear a human rant about what's unfair, but I still can't believe that you're siding with them, Bowser," said Elkon.

"Believe this!" Bowser shot back, already in position for a Tavado blast. The Moirai of Fire let loose his erratic and converging torpedos of fire, but aimed them at Elkon instead of at Deyanira. Regardless, the titan saw the attack and flew up in front of Elkon to defend him. With a wave of her hand, a wall of light materialized in front of her that deflected the fire blasts outwards and back at Bowser. Ramona responded with a light shield of her own which deflected the flames back at Deyanira. Instead of playing Bomb Rally with the flames, the titan decided to let loose a wave of shadow to meet them. As the shadow and fire clashed in midair, Bowser quickly grabbed hold of Athelstan by his waist and threw him up into the air at Deyanira with all his might. As he headed for the titan, the Moirai of Stone focused his energy into his blade to draw the debris from his previous attack back together and around his halberd to create a massive club. Deyanira couldn't react as the club formed within a second of Athelstan coming into striking distance, allowing the stone wielder to slam his stone-encased weapon into her torso. The rock around his halberd crumbled as he landed and pushed off of her abdomen to touch back down on the ground.

Athelstan's hit appeared to do a great deal of damage to Deyanira

as she tried to straighten herself out, though she would have to endure more as Bowser rushed forward in his Whirling Fortress technique and delivered a jarring hit to her left arm. Ramona finished by thrusting her rapier in a stabbing motion to fire a dense blast of light from her blade that burst through the air and struck Deyanira's right arm. Bowser and Athelstan backpedaled to regroup with Ramona, though were not prepared for the still recoiling titan to send yet another Mental Blast their way in response. Once again, the three Moirai's minds were blitzed.

"No! Not again!" Ramona screamed in tears as she held onto the sides of her head.

"Stop doing that!" Athelstan yelled in pain.

"Okay..." Deyanira replied, initiating a fourth Mental Blast. The attack brought the three elemental wielders to their knees and left them semi-conscious. She began chuckling softly with a sly smile at the downed fighters.

"Ramona!" Bowser growled. "Why haven't you done that blinding thing that Kokoro did?"

"I don't know how to do it!" the Moirai of Light responded. "I wasn't taught that!"

"I see your other teammates are not here," Elkon grumbled at the team of three as he hovered down low to the ground. "They must be at the Shadow Shrine then. Don't think you can outsmart me by splitting up, believing you could restore light and shadow to their original state at the same time. I'll see to it that both the light and shadow elements stay the way I made them." He turned away from the Moirai and made a swift slash with his hand to create another portal.

"What about these three here?" Deyanira asked.

"Kill them," Elkon ordered to the titan. "And then come quickly so we can head through the portal and deal with the other destined wielders."

Smirking, Deyanira brought both hands out in front of her and released a powerful burst of shadow energy. The overwhelming blast was large and massive, causing Deyanira herself to not be able to see her targets as the wave of shadows flowed towards them. Seeing no need to wait for the blast to finish the three Moirai off, Elkon and Deyanira proceeded through the portal behind them to head to the Shadow Shrine.

"I swear Ramona's in trouble," Andrew said with wide eyes. "I just know it!"

"Relax, man," Marut replied. "You're just all jittery and stuff cause she's not here. Once they finish up at the Light Shrine, they'll bring the Dimensional Mirror over here so we can use it on the Shadow Gemstone! At least we didn't have to fight anybody here!"

"How are you able to tell, Andrew?" Daisy asked.

"It's hard to explain," the Moirai of Shadow said. "But we possess a kind of link with each other that enables us to be clairsentient of one another. It's like how we're all able to read energy signatures, except more intricate and definite. Believe me when I say that something's wrong with our teammates at the Light Shrine!"

"I don't know, I doubt it," said Marut. "I'm pretty sure they're fine."

Warra gave the air wielder an odd look. "Marut, you should know as well as any of us by now that when you're sensing a disturbance in nature or in the atmosphere around us, it should not be ignored. In fact, it's arguably one of the most important abilities that we have and is strong proof of our connection with nature and the elements."

"Although I agree with Warra and Andrew, we can't do anything for now except wait," said Daisy.

Several moments passed in which the four Moirai stood quietly in wait for their comrades. Andrew stayed relaxed, but kept intense focus on his feelings. *Something's just not right* , he thought. *We may be down three fighters by the time all is said and done...*

"So I suppose we really don't have to fight any guardian here," said Daisy, breaking the silence. "Isn't that a bummer?"

As if right on cue, a dimensional portal suddenly appeared in the air above the gemstone pedestal from which Elkon and Deyanira emerged to confront the four Moirai. The elemental wielders leapt back and away from the gemstone pedestal as the two powerful beings floated down low to the ground.

"Well speak of the devil," said Andrew.

"You just had to say something, didn't you, Daisy?" muttered Warra.

"Yeah," the Moirai of Earth replied, eyeing down Elkon. "Aren't you happy that I did?"

"Hey! You!" Andrew shouted. "Elkon!"

Elkon shifted his gaze to get a look at the fighter who called him out. "Oh, you... I was wondering what happened to you."

"You broke my sword!" Andrew yelled. "Do you know how hard it is to get a perfectly black blade?"

"Yes," Elkon responded. "I did do that, didn't I? But nobody told you to intrude on my dwelling. The breaking of your tool was your own doing. If you wanted to preserve your blade, you should've stayed out of my sanctuary."

"Am I missing something?" Warra angstily asked the Moirai of Shadow.

"Ramona and I tracked him down and attempted to beat him in his tower," Andrew said. "But he bested the both of us. Had it not been for my illusions, we'd both be dead."

"You'll be dead now once Deyanira here has dealt with you accordingly," said Elkon. "All of you. Then after your demise, I will revisit each individual shrine and reinstate the effects I had originally placed on them uninhibited and unchallenged."

"Not like we're gonna let that happen," Daisy said, her arms crossed.

"All four of you...will rest in eternal slumber," Deyanira softly proclaimed.

"What? No way!" Marut called out. "You're saying you can beat all four of us?" Deyanira nodded in response to the green-clothed fighter, moving forward.

"You guys should've took up comedy since you like to joke around so much," Andrew snarled, a vortex of shadows emerging around his feet. "But then again, I'm not laughing."

"You will learn how hopeless your efforts are," said Elkon. "Deyanira! Dispose of them."

"With pleasure," the titan cooed, shadows crackling around her arms as she raised them to the sky. Warra unsheathed his twin daggers and Marut unlimbered his ninjato, both allowing their elemental energy to flow into their implements.

"Wow, Elkon," said Daisy, getting into stance. "We haven't seen you for a couple days and this is how you want to greet us?"

With the devastating burst of shadows rushing towards them, Ramona, used a good portion of her remaining energy to put up a light barrier over her and her teammates that protected them while the blast ran its course. The Moirai of Light's defenses held and prevented their demise. When everything settled, Ramona, Bowser, and Athelstan returned to their feet to see that Elkon and Deyanira were both gone and that a dimensional portal was in existence.

"They're not here," said Ramona. "They must have went through that portal!"

"That's just rude," Bowser grumbled. "At least have the decency to wait for the blast to hit us before assuming that we're dead. I mean, c'mon!"

"Yeah!" Athelstan agreed. "Totally and utterly disrespectful! They're not giving us enough credit!"

"The both of you!" Ramona anxiously shouted. "Why not be grateful that they did that? It was highly unlikely that we would've come out of that alive!"

"We could've taken her down," Athelstan replied. "It's that Mental Blast that was crippling us."

"We'll have to follow them through the portal," said Bowser. "They've most likely gone to the Shadow Shrine, and the rest of our team will need warning!"

"Well while we have the chance, let's handle the Light Gemstone now!" Ramona urged, rushing at the gemstone pedestal. "We may not get another opportunity like this again!"

"I'll go on ahead then!" said Athelstan as he darted forward and leapt into the portal.

Bowser followed the light wielder to the gemstone pedestal with the Dimensional Mirror in hand and got into position to allow Ramona to focus her light energy through the lens and onto the Light Gemstone. Ramona quickly let loose all of her remaining energy to speed up the process and complete the purification of light in under a minute. The golden gemstone gave off a brilliant glow as confirmation that the natural state of light was restored, meaning that the disaster that would've resulted from the deterioration of the planet's magnetic field had been averted. Unfortunately, they still had to stop the new disaster that was created from the fusion of Antasma and Cackletta.

"Alright, we need to move!" Bowser asserted. "Let's go through that portal!"

Chapter XXX

Power Play :

"Maybe this time you won't be so headstrong, Daisy," Elkon said. "Your teammates at the Light Shrine didn't fare too well against Deyanira the Dream Destroyer."

"What do you mean?" Daisy said in a gasp, the Moirai of Earth's expression dour.

"They perished – all three of them," Deyanira answered. "They couldn't handle my beauty...is the nice way of putting it..."

"How nice of you," Andrew sardonically muttered.

"Warra, go through the portal and tend to our friends!" Daisy ordered. "Quickly! We can't risk the magnetic field!"

"Why are you sending him back there," Elkon half-asked. "They won't be alive to greet him."

"Just go, Warra!" Daisy demanded. "Don't listen to him! They've gotta be alive!"

Before Warra could react however, Athelstan leapt out from the portal behind Elkon and Deyanira. The Moirai of Stone rolled along the ground upon landing to join the side of his team, much to the surprise of Elkon and Deyanira both.

"See?!" yelled Daisy.

"Oh, well would you look at that," said the titan. "The handsome one survived."

"Uh, excuse me?" Athelstan responded with a red face. Marut pointed and laughed at his brown-clothed teammate.

"I thought you disposed of him and the others," Elkon said in confusion.

"So did I," Deyanira flatly responded. "I suppose I...short-handed the blast..."

"Athelstan! What happened?" Warra asked. "Where's Bowser and Ramona?"

"On their way!" Athelstan replied. "They're purifying the light element right now and will be here shortly!"

"Hah! You hear that Elkon?" Marut called out. "I guess you must feel pretty stupid now!"

"You didn't manage to kill any of them, did you?" Elkon asked Deyanira.

"I will now," the titan assured.

"Get ready!" Athelstan warned his teammates. "This woman's a real pain!"

"All of you," Deyanira cooed, refocusing her shadow energy into her hands. "I'll slaughter all of you."

"We have to be careful," Athelstan whispered. "She can use some sort of mind attack that hits us without us even being aware of it!"

"Everyone, be aware and ready!" Warra shouted.

"Nothing can protect you from my greatness..." Deyanira proclaimed, letting loose a powerful Mental Blast. She let out a mischievous laugh as the elemental wielders went down to the ground with jarring sensations running through their heads and ravaging their minds. Elkon drifted high into the air above the arena to remove himself from any potential crossfire that could be produced from the upcoming conflict.

"...Was that the attack?" Daisy grunted out.

"Yeah," Athelstan croaked. "That was it!"

"Who here will be foolish enough...to continue?" Deyanira bellowed.

"Define 'foolish!' " Daisy growled, getting back to her feet and drawing earth from the surrounding environment. She formed a mass almost equal in size to Deyanira herself and sent it at the titan head-on. Deyanira blasted apart the heaping mass using a shadow burst without issue, but she did not see Daisy running up from behind the mass and was therefore not prepared for her when the earth wielder jumped up to deliver a forceful spin kick. After the titan took the blow to her torso, Warra let loose a wave of water with his twin daggers to knock her backwards. Marut had been focusing his air energy into lightning during Daisy's and Warra's attacks and looked ready to release it from his ninjato at Deyanira, but the titan had other plans. Deyanira covered herself in darkness and disappeared just as Marut released the lightning, avoiding the burst entirely.

"Up in the air!" Andrew called out.

Everyone looked up to see a cloud of shadow forming outside of the arena from which Deyanira emerged. Without warning, five more clouds of shadow formed, and Deyanira appeared from all those shadows as well. Within seconds, six Deyaniras surrounded the entire arena. All six of them began to softly laugh in near perfect unison.

"Guys, I don't like the look of this," Marut whimpered.

"Why would anyone?" Andrew replied.

All six Deyaniras raised their left arms and charged highly energized and crackling spheres of light around their hands, and all six of them targeted one of the five Moirai; Andrew getting stared down by two of the titans. When all six Deyaniras brought down their arms to release their attacks, all five of the elemental fighters dodged to move out of the way of the big and bright projectiles. In the process of trying to evade however, Warra and Marut both were hit by light spheres not intended for either of them. The Moirai of Water and Air both were harshly batted down to the ground, prompting all the Deyaniras to lift their right arms and do the same attack, except with shadow energy. This time around, all six of the titans targeted the two downed Moirai as they tried to get back to their feet. Athelstan rushed towards Warra and Marut just as the Deyaniras released

their attacks and dove out in front of his teammates to deflect the bursts of shadow with a swing of his halberd. Four bursts were deflected back at the Deyaniras and made contact with four of them, causing four of the six titans to explode and disappear. Because of the angle of the other two blasts though, Athelstan could not deflect them and was overwhelmed by their power as the blasts hit him in midair. The Moirai of Stone landed on the ground with a thud and rolled along the floor before coming to a rest at the side of the arena, unconscious.

The remaining two Deyaniras split to opposite sides of the arena and raised both of their arms up into the air. One Deyanira gathered a huge ball of of light while the other Deyanira conjured a great burst of shadow, both bursts being a fifth the size of the arena. Both of the titans threw the energy spheres, the light sphere aimed at Daisy and Andrew and the shadow sphere heading towards Warra and Marut. Daisy and Andrew both put up their arms to guard against some of the impact of the devastating light blast, but were still hit and knocked to the ground regardless. Warra charged his twin daggers and made a double diagonal slash to reflect the shadow burst back at one of the Deyaniras. After the reflected shadow blast made contact and destroyed the Deyanira that originally fired it, the great titan was one single being once more. She disappeared into a cloud of shadows again to emerge from a veil of darkness in the center of the arena.

Daisy and Andrew had snapped back to their feet, and Warra and Marut stood ready for whatever attack the powerful titan had coming next. Without warning, Deyanira's whole upper body inflated to twice its size as waves and waves of vicious shadow energy began to surround her. From underneath her floating form, several small voids scattered and shifted along the ground, emanating outwards. Daisy, Andrew, and Marut all managed to dodge, but Warra got caught by one of the voids and dropped down into it. The remaining voids stopped moving and disappeared as stillness and eerie quiet pervaded the next few moments. The Moirai furiously looked around to try and find their water teammate, but could not spot him anywhere. Deyanira returned to her normal size and broke the silence by giving a heavy laugh.

"Stop laughing!" Daisy snapped.

"What did you do to Warra?" Andrew angrily yelled. The Dream Destroyer sighed in response but said nothing, much to the chagrin of Daisy, Andrew, and Marut.

"I can't even sense him," said Marut. "Is he even alive anymore?"

"Is he even in this dimension anymore?" Andrew added.

A void suddenly opened up in the air above just long enough to drop Warra back into the center of the arena before disappearing without a trace. Daisy dashed over to the dazed, blue-clothed wielder.

"Warra!" Daisy yelled. "What happened?!"

"...I don't want to talk about it," Warra faintly replied as he trembled with a pale face.

"C'mon, buddy," said Daisy. Picking up Warra and draping him over her back, she carried him to the side of the arena. "Just stay here and chill out, okay?"

Warra said nothing as Daisy put him down. All he could do was give a paranoid stare up into the sky.

Damn; what the hell happened in that void? Daisy thought. *I've never seen anybody look this bad before...*

Without warning, Deyanira used a Mental Blast that brought everyone to their knees in maddening head pain. The titan began incessantly laughing as the Moirai reeled about from her attack. Daisy flopped over on her stomach and waited for her senses to come back to her just to see her friends around her struggling to get back to their feet. Just before Deyanira released another Mental Blast, Bowser and Ramona emerged from the portal and touched down on the ground behind her. Once again, Deyanira utilized her brutal technique without hesitation. Interestingly enough, neither Bowser nor Ramona were affected by the attack. Daisy grimaced as her mind once more got assaulted, but then subtly smiled with the realization that came from what she had witnessed before succumbing to Deyanira's Mental Blast.

"...You really did short-hand that blast of yours at the Light Shrine, Deyanira," Elkon remarked, his eyes drawn to the Moirai of Fire and Light.

"Hey, are you alright?" Ramona asked as she helped Andrew back to his feet.

"I was wondering the same thing about you," Andrew said. "I've taken some abuse, but I've definitely got some fight left in me."

"Get up, ya clown," said Bowser, helping Marut to his feet.

"That giant woman's the clown here!" Marut replied.

Once her mind regained its stability, Daisy got back up as Bowser, Marut, Ramona, and Andrew all converged on her to take up position against the mighty titan together. Deyanira looked disgruntled and unamused by the Moirai's resilience.

"You all survived Deyanira once, but I assure you that you won't survive her again," Elkon echoed through the air.

"Andrew, follow me to the back," Daisy quietly said to the wielder in black and purple. The two leapt to the far back of their side of the arena. Bowser, Ramona, and Marut spread out a bit in response to the change in position of their teammates. "I saw something that I think you might be able to exploit," she then whispered to Andrew. "Deyanira has to see where her target is to be able to use that mind attack! I noticed that when Bowser and Ramona were behind her, they weren't affected!"

"Oh... I know exactly where you're going with this!" replied Andrew.

Deyanira brought both hands forward and created a large, pulsating burst of iridescent light. At the same time she fired it at the Moirai, Bowser let out a breath of fire and Marut unleashed a funnel of rippling gusts that both collided with Deyanira's sphere towards the center of the arena to create a massive explosion.

"We have a chance! Blast her now!" Daisy screamed.

Andrew put out a Gemivado blast through the explosion. Although

he couldn't exactly see, he was pretty confident that he was smothering their opponent in shadow energy. He was not expecting a larger and considerably more powerful wave of light to come rushing out through the explosion and consume his own attack in its entirety. The Moirai of Shadow would've been completely overtaken had Bowser not jumped at Deyanira's blast with his Whirling Fortress maneuver to deflect the energy up into the air.

"Thanks," said Andrew with gratitude. Bowser came to a stop offset from the Moirai of Shadow and briefly cocked a smile before refocusing his attention to Deyanira, who became visible once more after everything settled. Andrew then turned to his earth teammate and said, "I'm going to need a little bit of time to implement the technique, Daisy."

"If you could start it now, that would be great," said Daisy.

Andrew began focusing his energy. "Alright, I only have enough energy left to be able to do this once as a result of that last attack I put out, so I need you to be clutch here."

Daisy gave a confident smirk and nodded as Bowser flared up fire around his arms and Marut created a miniature vortex around his ninjato. *With this illusion that Andrew will project, she won't be able to tell where we really are, rendering her Mental Blast useless!* she said in her mind.

Deyanira loomed across from them with a careless and complacent smile on her face. "You know, Bowser, I still have all my memories – because I was formerly Antasma and Cackletta both, of course. I must tell you; I'm just itching to smite you into non-existence so terribly. I don't care about the rest of these scrubs here; it's just you that I want dead. And then...Mario and Luigi both must be executed..."

Everyone in the arena directed their gaze to Bowser, who winced and cringed in angst and frustration at the titan's words. Deyanira began haughtily laughing at the Moirai of Fire's rattled demeanor.

"What's so funny?" Bowser grunted.

"Did I just see fear from you, Koopa King?" Deyanira rhetorically questioned.

"We have no fear here!" Daisy snapped. "None of us!"

"I do..." Ramona said to herself.

"SILENCE!" Deyanira boomed, the sky crackling from the mere sound of her elevated voice. "YOU ARE IRRELEVANT!"

"They're *all* relevant!" Bowser howled. "And I'll see to it personally that you won't even be able to get anywhere near either Mario or Luigi!" Daisy's eyes shot wide open in surprise of Bowser's statement, but Deyanira frowned in distaste.

"...Bowser..." Elkon softly hissed in anger.

A period of tense silence followed, with no one sure of what to do at all. Ramona peered at the Moirai of Earth, confused and anxious. *Daisy, why haven't you transformed yet?* she thought. *We could really use your Nova Form right about now! Why are you hesitating?*

"...Interesting," Deyanira finally said with intrigue.

"Listen Deyanira; your personal vendettas are not important in the grand scheme of things," Elkon said. "We have a goal that is close to slipping from our grasp! A grand goal larger than your petty squabbles!"

Deyanira's frown became more pronounced, coinciding with a sudden shift in the tone of the atmosphere. All the Moirai sensed the change in the Shadow Shrine, but Elkon seemed to have not.

"Did you hear me?" Elkon asked.

"...I heard you," Deyanira responded with sass.

Elkon suddenly perked up in surprise at the titan's tone. Andrew stopped gathering shadow energy for his advanced technique, seeing that something both good and bad was developing at that very moment.

"Then again...why am I *listening* to you?" Deyanira pondered aloud.

"Because I'm the one who brought you here, obviously," Elkon replied. "You wouldn't exist if it wasn't because of me."

The titan playfully chuckled as she raised an arm at Elkon. "So?"

"What?!" Elkon gasped with alarm. Before he could even react, a bolt of light struck him and knocked him to the ground. A burst of shadow immediately followed that pummeled Elkon as he lay sprawled out on the floor.

Deyanira once again laughed, though this time she directed it towards Elkon rather than the Moirai. "I am Cackletta, and I am Antasma. Did you honestly believe that I wouldn't even attempt to overtake you? It was bound to happen sooner or later, so be glad that it was sooner..."

Elkon picked himself up and dusted himself off, his hood still over his head. "Treacherous," he muttered.

"You should've thought twice before causing the creation of a being that was and is beyond your power," Deyanira boasted. "Someone like you should know...that those with the highest power are entitled to do whatever they wish, not what someone else tells them to do."

"That's a lie!" Bowser called out. "Those with the highest power must do what's best for the common good!"

"What happened to you, Bowser?" Deyanira nonchalantly asked. "You're not Bowser. No way; not the one I remember."

"You don't know a damn thing about me!" the Moirai of Fire growled.

"Of course I do..." Deyanira insisted. "...I was *inside* of you."

"What?!" Ramona asked with a puzzled expression. Marut started laughing uncontrollably.

"Yo! Marut!" Andrew yelled. "A little maturity please!"

The green-clothed fighter began to calm himself down and

straighten himself back out. "Sorry bro, but you gotta admit, that was pretty funny!"

"The *real* Bowser would've...exercised his power appropriately," Deyanira cooed. "But it seems that you, the so-called 'Koopa King,' are now just a hollow shell of your former self...and I don't mean that big and heavy thing on your back."

The Moirai of fire growled in mounting anger, the flames around his arms growing ever more erratic. Deyanira paid no mind to it and continued antagonizing him. "A truly pathetic ruler. That's probably the reason I lost to the Mario Brothers; because I made the foolish decision to possess your weak body. A weak body that is utterly reflective of a weak mind...and a weak spirit."

"Okay – no!" Bowser snarled, slamming his claws together to let loose a massive Tavado blast. The intense flames proved almost twice as large as the burst he fired off earlier as they ripped through the air and struck Deyanira with unforgiving force. "How's this for WEAK?" he grunted out. Deyanira was clearly struggling trying to withstand the stream of flames. "It's not about trying to prove one's might through conquests! What makes one strong is their character! What makes you truly strong is what you do with your power! And that means..."

Bowser bolstered the power of his Tavado even further, forcing all his energy through the blast. "Protecting the weak makes you strong! Protecting the common good makes you strong! Standing up to those abusing their power makes you strong! Knowing how to use your power in a way that benefits everyone around you makes you strong! And lending your power to a greater cause makes you strong! For all those reasons, I will never be weak! For all those reasons, *you* are weak, and I am strong! As I said before – you don't know a damn thing about me!"

"Wait, what are you doing?!" Deyanira shouted. She could no longer fend off the mighty flame torpedos of Bowser's Tavado blast. The fiery technique overtook her, engulfing her and shrouding the sky with dust and smoke.

"There, that's it..." said Bowser, panting and sweating. "All of my

energy went into that blast... She's through."

Neither the Moirai nor Elkon said anything. Everyone just stared into the air where the massive cloud of smoke and dust was shifting and expanding. Several seconds passed, the only noise coming from the burning cloud overhead. And then shock dominated the scene as the cloud dissipated to reveal the Dream Destroyer, damaged but not down.

"...No..." Ramona whispered, quivering.

"Very good, Koopa King," Deyanira murmured. "Too bad that even with all your power, I am still vastly superior."

"Maybe today," Bowser responded. "But in the grand scheme of things, I am the one...who is truly superior to you."

"No," Deyanira groused in bitterness. "You are inferior! And the inferior *always* die first!" The titan thrust forward her hands and allowed her fingertips to glow in a circular pattern as light energy coalesced in her palms and expanded to fill the space within the outline her fingertips created.

"That looks like a Hyperbeam!" Ramona warned.

"Too late, deary!" Deyanira yelled, blasting an intensely golden column of light energy at the Koopa King. The beam moved at blazing speed and looked capable of vaporizing Bowser. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a large dimensional portal opened up just in front of the Moirai of Fire through which the Hyperbeam entered. Everyone looked at Elkon, whose hand was up and glowing.

"What is this?" Deyanira playfully asked, cutting off her Hyperbeam.

"I see it was a mistake bringing you into existence," said Elkon. "A being like you with your kind of power should not be here, because you will only establish a dictatorship. You're not going to instill the kind of order and justice that this world needs..."

"Please; of course I will," Deyanira replied with a frown, turning to Elkon and readying another Hyperbeam. "A world where I am dominating sounds like the order and justice that this world needs to

me, and what sounds good to me...is all that matters. Oh, and thank you for the fusion. I am quite elated with the results..."

A massive bolt of magnetized frost shot through the air and bombarded Deyanira before she could finish preparing her attack, much to everyone's surprise. The white-clothed fighter from which the attack came made a landing in the arena halfway between Elkon and the Moirai, his twin forearm machetes humming with elemental energy and the pendant around his neck emitting a ghastly glow.

"Grekka!" Daisy shouted. "Hey! Great to see you back!"

The ice wielder did not so much as bat an eye at the Moirai of Earth. His gaze remained focused on the Dream Destroyer, who was now noticeably frustrated.

"That's it..." Deyanira echoed. "You all are on the event horizon of my wrath!"

"I'm shaking," Andrew nonchalantly replied in sarcasm. "Oh no, somebody help me."

"Hush your mouth, boy!" Deyanira snapped at the Moirai of Shadow. Just as she prepared to do a Mental Blast, another burst of ice and cold blitzed her. Elkon took the opportunity to materialize his Dimensional Saber as Grekka continued to pound the titan with ice.

"You wretched little bug!" Deyanira screeched in anger, her arms now up to block and defend. "Now you're just annoying me!"

Grekka said nothing and continued assaulting with his ice blasts. The shine from his pendant appeared to dance around within the pink jewel itself.

"Something seems a little...weird, about Grekka," Marut said under his breath.

"He definitely seems a lot more powerful than when we last saw him, if that's even possible!" Daisy said in awe.

"It hasn't even been a full day since we last saw him!" Athelstan added.

Destined elemental wielder or not, I don't trust him at all , Ramona thought.

Deyanira, now absolutely livid, emitted a large sphere of shadows from her core that covered her from every angle and effectively ended Grekka's offensive. After a few moments, the shadows receded, and Deyanira thrust her arms forward to force out an immensely dense blast of light energy capable of vaporizing the ice wielder. Grekka kept up his twin forearm machetes and maintained their elemental charge as he made a diagonal double slash to counter and block the incoming burst of light, ultimately disbanding the attack.

Deyanira then tried to execute a Mental Blast again, but was interrupted by bolts of fire, shadow, and air coming from Bowser, Andrew, and Marut respectively that pelted her. Just as she turned to face the group of Moirai who had just attacked her, Grekka shot out another burst of ice from his weapons. The ice struck Deyanira head-on, but the titan shrugged it off and rebounded with fury and rage.

"ENOUGH, MORTAL SCUM!" Deyanira howled. She brought her arms up to create a colossal mass of light energy that rose up into the sky and expanded to twice the size of the titan herself. "You all die now! This whole planet is going to die!" She sent streams of shadow energy rippling through her godly globe of light. The atmosphere around the Shadow Shrine began to bend and contort as a result of the forces from the titan's apocalyptic technique.

"Uh-oh, looks like she's reached a breaking point!" Marut shouted.

"Really? I would've thought that she's the happiest she has ever been!" Bowser sardonically replied.

"Guys? Shouldn't we do something?" Ramona whimpered, her lips quivering. "You know, to not have the whole planet get annihilated?!"

"Go ahead and try!" Deyanira projected across the arena, her energy overhead fiercely crackling and ripping through the sky.

"Really?!" Daisy yelled. "You can't just blow up a planet whenever you feel like it!" As if right on cue, Deyanira's gargantuan charge of light and shadows pumped up even larger.

"She sure as hell can," Andrew muttered with wide eyes.

"Don't be a sore loser!" Deyanira haughtily snapped. "You all have to die some time!"

Suddenly and without and prior warning, Elkon leapt up from behind Deyanira and activated his Dimensional Saber's special ability as he brought it down across her back. As he slashed clean through her, a portal opened and expanded outwards from her body. Trapping and gradually engulfing her completely as she screamed in simultaneous terror and rage, the portal transported the Dream Destroyer to another dimension altogether before closing up in mere moments. The titan's massive collection of energy scattered and dissipated, and calm returned once more to the Shadow Shrine whereas just seconds before, the destruction of the entire planet looked imminent.

"What did you just do to Deyanira?" Marut asked Elkon.

"I sent her to a different dimension," Elkon said. "Which one, is not important. I take fault for not accounting for the tendencies of Antasma and Cackletta both when I fused them together. I did not think they would retain anything from their past selves."

"You take fault for a lot of things, Elkon," Daisy bitterly said.

"Oh, do I?" Elkon snapped. "Who here are the heroes and who here are the villains? You still can't answer me that because you have learned nothing in the time you've spent opposing me."

"I've learned plenty!" Daisy hollered. "We all have! It's you who has yet to learn!"

"You're right," replied Elkon. "Because learning is a lifelong experience. Only a fool would cease to learn. Only learners are not fools. Such is the way of the universe in its vast magnificence."

Athelstan began stirring about and managed to get to his feet under his own power. "...Hey, what did I miss?" he questioned to no one in

particular.

"You missed Elkon save the world from destruction," Bowser said.

Athelstan's eyes widened in surprise. "Am I still knocked out?!"

"I did that for the planet," Elkon spat out. "Not for you humans."

"Hey, bub! You're human too – don't you forget that!" Marut shot back.

"However unfortunate that is, I am an *enlightened* human," said Elkon. "As is one more of us here."

Warra appeared to try to get up and move but stopped, prompting Marut and Daisy to walk over to their teammate and help him up. "Warra! Get up!" Daisy urged. "Warra!"

"Let me try this," said Marut, grabbing hold of Warra's arms. "SNAP OUTTA IT!" he shouted, shaking Warra as fast as he could. "WAKE UP!"

"Alright! ALRIGHT!" Warra exclaimed, broken from his trance-like stupor.

"Warra, what happened?" Daisy asked. "What happened in that void? What did Deyanira do to you when she sent you through that void?!"

"I don't remember," Warra somberly replied with a haunted expression plastered on his face. "But I know I don't want to remember either..."

"It seems fitting that Deyanira was able to wield both the light and shadow, doesn't it?" Bowser thought aloud.

"Yeah, it does," said Andrew. "Light and Shadow are both neutrals, the physical representation of the contrast between black and white that coexist together in harmony and cannot survive without the other."

"So you can't survive without me?" Ramona asked, blushing.

Rosalina suddenly appeared before everyone, not as an astral clone but as her true self. She marched over to the Moirai's side of the arena as they all gathered together. Grekka kept silent and remained standing by himself, however.

"I came here expecting the worst but see that it miraculously did not occur – how is this so?" Rosalina asked.

"Don't ask," Bowser muttered.

"Grand Elder!" Ramona exclaimed. "Elkon is the reincarnation of the creator of space!"

The information garnered surprised looks from Daisy, Warra, Andrew, and Marut; all who had been at the Shadow Shrine when Elkon had revealed the information on his identity. Rosalina herself however, showed no surprise whatsoever.

"Yes, we knew that already," Rosalina replied. "There has been plenty of discussion up at the Comet Observatory about it."

"What?!" Bowser grunted.

"Then why didn't you tell us that when you figured it out?" Warra asked.

"Because it changes nothing – he's still supposed to be dead," came the answer from the Elder of the Cosmos. "And truth be told, you were never supposed to know. The identities of such deities that have been reincarnated into mortals are supposed to be kept in secret."

"But then how is a reincarnated deity supposed to be dead?" Warra asked as if he were pleading for the answer. "And escape record, at that? Still, no sense is being made of any of this!"

Without warning, a large chunk of ice flew threw the air and struck Rosalina head-on. To everyone's shock, Rosalina was knocked over and sent skipping along the ground. Warra and Ramona ran over to help the Elder of the Cosmos back to her feet, while the others turned their gaze to the origin of the attack.

"Grekka! That was not appropriate!" Ramona shouted in horror.

"What was that, Grekka?" Daisy growled in a low tone.

"Sorry," the ice welder finally uttered, his forearm machetes glowing. "I meant to make that one sharp."

"What do you mean?" Andrew asked, his expression intense.

Grekka returned his elemental tools to his back and moved across the arena to stand with Elkon, who then disbanded the portal that bridged to the Light Shrine and created a new portal behind them. The ice wielder's expression was emotionless, but the faint illumination from the pendant around his neck made his face look like it was suppressing anger that had been suppressed for years.

"Grekka here has come to his senses, is all," Elkon responded. "You're all welcome to follow us through the portal. In fact...that's exactly what we want you to do." Elkon turned and entered his portal, prompting Grekka to do the same.

"Grekka – WAIT!" Daisy yelled with hoarseness and urgency in her tone. But the ice wielder did not wait, and followed Elkon into the portal; destination, unknown. All Daisy could do was murmur in confusion, "...Why..."

None of the other Moirai nor Rosalina were able to say anything. Bowser and Andrew quickly darted for the Shadow Gemstone across the arena to begin the process of purifying it. No one uttered a word throughout the whole purification process, and it remained silent several moments later when the shadow element was definitively reverted to its natural state. No one celebrated – the situation that had developed with Grekka overshadowed their accomplishment of restoring all eight elements.

"So what do we do now?" Ramona asked, breaking the painful silence.

"That was the last thing I was expecting from him," said Rosalina.

"Are you alright, Grand Elder?" asked Athelstan.

"For the most part, yes," the Rosalina answered. "We should worry more about Elkon."

"And whatever has happened to Grekka," Marut added.

"Do we follow them?" Warra thought aloud. "It could be a trap. Elkon said himself that he wanted us to follow them."

"Is there anything else we can do?" Andrew asked.

"There isn't," Daisy said, firm and tough. "We must go through the portal. All of us."

Chapter XXXI

The Tower :

On a cliff face overlooking a vast, barren field, Rosalina and the Moirai observed the layout of the landscape of the Twelfth Dimension. Just barely sticking out from the dark brown color of the environment underneath the sky of many red and pink hues, Elkon's Tower loomed in the distance. Despite the bright sky, the ground and terrain all around them was very dark, appearing as it would if the entire region was under nightfall.

"So that's it?" Warra asked, referring to the faintly visible gunmetal gray structure.

"Yeah...that's it," Ramona affirmed. "I remember that place all too well."

"I would be very surprised if he hasn't added some sort of defense to his tower," stated Andrew.

"Oh good, I wasn't the only one expecting that then," said Bowser.

"This is a turning point," said Rosalina. "When you first started out this journey, you were all individual people, very different from one another and yet united together under one cause. You all answered the call to duty and followed through with the cleansing and purification of the elements that had been corrupted by a misguided reincarnation of an ancient deity; not knowing what you would all be getting yourselves into, not knowing where you would end up, not knowing who you would meet and befriend along the way, not knowing the magnitude of your adventure – of your elemental odyssey, rather – not knowing the dangers, creatures, and beings you would face, not knowing how much you would change in a handful of days, and not knowing just how far you all would come. With minimal preparation and the fate of the world resting on your shoulders, you all stood in the face of overwhelming adversity and held your ground to prevail. Your success is without a doubt no coincidence."

"What about Grekka?" asked Daisy.

"Grekka has made his choice," said Warra. "However much we may disagree, he made his decision."

"Which means he's an enemy now, just like Elkon," Andrew asserted.

"He always gave me a bad vibe," said Ramona.

"He's not bad though!" insisted Daisy. "He's just misguided like Elkon is!"

"So Elkon is not bad?" Warra asked in response.

"I didn't say that," Daisy replied. "I just think we need to at least try and be more understanding and try to get him back on our side."

"Maybe we should," said Marut. "I feel sorry for the guy, really."

"To be honest, so do I..." Bowser thought aloud.

"Well, the development with Grekka is quite disturbing," Rosalina said in agreement. "But how much does it change your course of action?"

"It changes nothing," Daisy sternly asserted. "We go in, we get Grekka back, we stop Elkon, we get out. I put the responsibility all on myself, however this ends up turning out."

"And if you cannot help Grekka?" Rosalina asked.

Daisy's tone grew excessively dark. "You leave that to me."

An uncomfortable silence of grim uncertainty followed and pervaded the tone of the group for several moments until Marut decided to break it. "Okay! Let's get movin' then! Elkon and stuff!"

"Up until now, you have referred to yourselves as the Moirai – incarnations of destiny," said Rosalina. "And although accurate, you all must now transcend that title and become the heroes of destiny. Please, all of you continue to lend your strength for just a little while

longer."

"We will do our best," Warra assured.

"Thank you, Grand Elder," said Ramona, full of graciousness.

"No, thank you," Rosalina replied. The Elder of the Cosmos turned and reentered the portal the group had come out of, and Ramona and Andrew allowed the portal to disband. The Moirai then turned their attention fully to Elkon's Tower, proceeding to begin making their way towards the great complex.

At the base of the tower, the Moirai arrived, ready to face whatever awaited them on the other side of the large double doors. Everyone quickly received a dose of Warra's healing water, using up most of the remaining amount that he had. The healing water only appeared to be capable of being used about two more times at the most once everyone had their share.

"This is it then," Bowser murmured.

"Yeah...looks like it," Andrew said with a subtle smirk.

"The tower has six floors," said Ramona. "One spacious room takes up the entirety of each level, and a staircase winds around the circular walls of each room to give access to the next floor."

"Good information to note," Athelstan replied. "Ascending the tower won't be complicated then."

"I believe we're all ready to go," said Warra. Each of the Moirai nodded to convey that they were ready to enter the building.

"Then c'mon!" Daisy yelled as she busted her elbow into the great doors to swing them open. The elemental wielders of destiny stormed into the tower only to find themselves facing a very large blue beast covered in a stone shell the moment they stepped inside. The creature focused its eyes on the group with attentiveness and snarled, appearing to be guarding the staircase behind it.

"The hell kinda welcome wagon is this?!" asked Bowser.

The creature, otherwise known as Rollodillo, roared and curled itself up into a ball to roll itself at the Moirai. Athelstan jumped forward to catch the heavy and powerful revolving creature with the brute force of his mighty musculature. The Moirai of Stone locked himself and Rollodillo in place as the creature continued spinning, causing an indentation to appear in the floor of the tower underneath the beast.

"Impatient, isn't it?" Warra exclaimed.

"It's wasting no time, that's for sure!" said Andrew.

"I'll take care of this guy!" Athelstan called out. "You all just get back and out of the way! This will be over quick!" He quickly slammed a knee into the spinning beast to stop its rotation and then shoved it backwards. The beast flopped on the ground, but didn't stay down for long. Rollodillo began to shake itself off, then roared as it straightened itself out and got ready to attack again.

Athelstan unlimbered his halberd and stood in defense as Rollodillo charged forward to trample him. The Moirai of Stone blocked the incoming beast with the ax-side of his weapon before the creature could ram into him with its stone-armored head. Once again using his strength, he pressed back Rollodillo with the help of his halberd and gave a forceful push to knock the beast off of its feet. Athelstan jumped forward to land a kick on Rollodillo's head, but the beast coiled up and snapped itself back to smack the stone wielder clear across the room to the side.

Athelstan slammed into the wall and landed on the ground with a thud, then swiftly replaced his halberd across his back and propped himself up on a hand, foot, and knee in anticipation of Rollodillo's next move. Like a raging bull, Rollodillo dug its feet into the ground and then charged at Athelstan. The Moirai of Stone was in great position and dodged to the side just as the beast came rushing at him, causing it to ram itself into the wall of the tower. Rollodillo not only put large cracks and dents in the wall but also stunned itself as a result of the force of the impact on its head. Seizing the opportunity that opened up, Athelstan grabbed hold of it on its back and heaved the beast up over his head before spiking it into the

ground on its unarmored side with all his physical might, knocking it unconscious.

"That really didn't take too long at all!" commented Marut.

"Very well done, Athelstan!" Warra said in praise.

"Hey, I gotta make up for my lack of victories," Athelstan replied.

"Alright, let's keep moving!" said Daisy, gesturing to the staircase.

Up the stairs the Moirai went, coiling around the room in a full circle as they ascended to the second floor to see a giant mound of stones lying on the ground in front of the staircase to the third floor. Two bright yellow orbs suddenly lit up at the top of the pile as the stones became an animated head with a pair of hands that defied gravity. The newly formed Bouldergeist directed its attention towards the intruding elemental warriors.

"Oh c'mon!" Bowser grunted. "Is this going to be a thing on every floor?!"

"If you're gonna have a remark for every floor, then yes," replied Andrew.

"I'll see what I can do here," said Warra, unsheathing his twin daggers. "This shouldn't be too much of an issue."

Stones began rotating around the sentient stone pile as well as arcing over what appeared to function as its head. Warra jumped forward with his twin daggers fully charged with elemental energy, ready for combat. Bouldergeist began shooting off rock after rock, one after the other at Warra. Using his twin daggers, Warra blasted each incoming projectile with bolts of water. After throwing a few dozen rocks with no success, Bouldergeist stopped its attack and brought its giant hands up high overhead, yawning and exposing a large red bulb in its mouth. Its hands moved over to Warra and slammed down onto the ground, but Warra was able to swiftly roll forward and out of the way to avoid being flattened. Bouldergeist returned its giant hands to the sides of its large, cat-like head and threw out a punch at the Moirai of Water. Warra, unprepared, took

the punch and flopped over multiple times before landing on his back.

The stone spirit curled its eyes and began laughing at the downed water wielder, but Warra saw an opportunity that arose from the stone spirit's gaping mouth. Channeling a large portion of his elemental energy into his twin daggers, Warra shot a highly charged bolt of water into Bouldergeist's mouth to hit the red bulb. In an instant, Bouldergeist stopped laughing and began gagging and choking.

"Apparently it doesn't like drinking," Bowser commented.

Bouldergeist soon fell apart and crumbled, exposing the spirit that was inhabiting the mound of stone. Visible and now frighted without its stone shell, the Bouldergeist Spirit darted towards and phased through the wall to escape and flee.

"Swiftly done," said Ramona.

"Thanks," Warra replied. "Let's continue."

The group of elemental wielders traveled up the stairs to the third floor only to see a bitter Dino Piranha awaiting them. Its large, green body and giant, flowery purple head would have been an impressive sight if its lack of eyes wasn't so laughable.

"I'm not even gonna ask how that's possible," Bowser muttered.

"It looks like it was woken up prematurely," Warra quietly stated.

"It was the noise from the second floor that did it!" said Marut. "Lemme take a shot at this thing."

Marut stepped forward, though the large plant-animal hybrid didn't respond or retaliate in any way. It wasn't until the Moirai of Air unsheathed his ninjato that the Dino Piranha let out a screech and began to chase after the air wielder, angered by the presentation of the sharp implement.

"Okay – maybe not!" Marut squealed, turning around to run. The Dino Piranha picked up speed and followed Marut around the room

counterclockwise.

"Hey, you called it!" Athelstan shouted. "Don't back down now!"

The Dino Piranha continued to chase Marut around the circular room while the Moirai remained tight to the wall to make sure they were not in the way. After two revolutions, the Dino Piranha kept its pace with Marut.

"Do you think that Dino Piranha knows its a circle?" Athelstan asked.

"Do you think either one of them knows its a circle," Bowser muttered.

"It has no eyes!" Andrew shouted. "It can't even see! How is it tracking Marut?"

"Is it following Marut's scent?" Daisy wondered aloud.

That gives me an idea , Marut thought. The Moirai of Air ramped up his running speed into high gear and blazed around the tower floor to get behind the Dino Piranha, who was surprisingly still running around in a circle and apparently unaware that Marut had dashed behind it. On the Dino Piranha's tail was a round, sizable brown bulb that looked pretty soft compared to the rest of the beast's body.

"What's that thing on its tail?" Athelstan asked.

Well that's convenient , Marut said in his mind as he forcefully kicked the large bulb. The Dino Piranha emitted a loud shriek, appearing to be in pain from Marut's strike but continuing to run. Seeing the response, Marut continued chasing the creature down and attacking the bulb on its tail with a barrage of kicks. With each hit, the beast let out screams and shrieks. The plant-animal hybrid then started to run erratically in confusion, though Marut was able to continue landing more hits on its tail.

"Give it a real good one, Marut!" Daisy shouted.

Putting a ton of extra force into one final kick, Marut slammed his foot into the bulb on the beast's tail. As the Dino Piranha finally stopped running altogether, the force actually managed to somehow

stretch and propel the bulb on the beast's tail a good distance away before it snapped back and clubbed the beast in its giant head. The Dino Piranha then hazily staggered and careened towards the center of the room where it flopped over on its back, panting and conceding the fight.

"Definitely not the smartest of creatures, I think," Warra commented.

"I'm not complaining," said Bowser. "That just makes it easier to get to the next level."

The group continued on their way, walking around the defeated Dino Piranha to get to the stairs on the other side of the room. After climbing the third staircase, the Moirai found themselves on the surprisingly empty fourth floor.

"And now we're walking in on...nothing," said Marut.

"There's nobody here!" Daisy exclaimed. "Let's just dart for the other staircase!"

All seven of the elemental wielders ran for the ascending stairs, already thinking about what might be waiting for them on the fifth floor. All of a sudden, Andrew smacked into something and fell down backwards. Everyone turned around to see why Andrew fell, but the room was completely empty and there was nothing in Andrew's way.

"Do you MIND?!" a voice suddenly said.

"No! Do *you* mind – wherever you are!" Andrew snapped.

A great, large boo appeared in front of Andrew as the Moirai of Shadow backed away and got to his feet. It wasn't just any boo however, but King Boo himself! With a wave of his stubby little arm, King Boo covered the entire floor with a thin sheen of ice.

"Yes – I DO mind," King Boo replied with a sly smile that flared his razor sharp teeth.

A circle of sixteen images of King Boo cascaded around Andrew and all moved in randomized directions before fading out so that the room was once again empty, but the ghost could be heard

intermittently laughing in various directions. King Boo then appeared behind Andrew and rolled himself onto the icy ground as a ballistic boulder to smash into the shadow wielder. King Boo followed up again with another boulder roll, except much more violent and sufficient enough to send Andrew airborne. The Moirai of Shadow flipped in midair and horizontally slashed his hand to create a scythe of shadow aimed at the ghost, but King Boo spat out his huge tongue and used it to deflect the cutting blast of shadow into the ground.

"Eww..." Ramona mumbled.

The ghost suddenly began to inflate and puff up, appearing to be readying an attack. He opened his mouth to let loose a large, ghastly burst of impure shadow at Andrew. Whereas pure shadow has always been identifiable as a clean mixture of black and purple darkness, the sickening shadow released by King Boo was a slow moving, black orb with several scarlet and lime green pulses. Andrew put his arms up to block the blast but was surprised to find out that the attack somehow stripped him of almost all his remaining energy.

"That's not shadow!" Andrew angrily accused.

"Maybe not the shadow you know," King Boo responded. "Then again, you won't know anything after I'm through with you..."

Andrew didn't say anything in response, tired and suddenly very faint. King Boo readied another, more potent blast of the same type and let it flow towards the Moirai of shadow, who was too depleted to be able to dodge out of the way in time. Just when it looked like the team's shadow wielder was just about guaranteed to die, Ramona jumped in front of Andrew to catch the blast of shadow in her hands and force it up into the ceiling off to the side. With what modest amount of energy she had been able to recover since the fight against Deyanira, she produced a thick light laser from her palms that struck King Boo and caused a considerable amount of damage to the ghost despite the attack's lack of power.

"Not the light! NOT THE LIGHT!" King Boo shrieked.

"What..." Ramona murmured.

"Ack! Put those away!" King Boo demanded, referring to Ramona's hands.

"With all due respect – that was not my strongest technique at all!" Ramona replied in confusion.

"Shut up, you wretched human!" the ghost cried in raging frustration.

"Well, I could just let loose another one of these bursts of light then," said Ramona, knowingly bluffing.

"NO!" King Boo screamed. "I hate you light wielders! Elkon didn't say anything about light wielders! I'm outta here! That pendant's not worth it! But I guarantee you haven't seen the last of me! Just you wait and see!"

That pendant's not worth it? Daisy thought. *What's that supposed to mean? What pendant?*

With a menacingly upset frown, King Boo opened and entered a portal that promptly closed upon his departure from the Twelfth Dimension. Ramona helped Andrew to his feet, who seemed able to move but was otherwise drained of almost all of his power.

"Thanks," Andrew said, strain in his voice.

"No need to thank me," Ramona replied. "You definitely would not have survived if that last blast got a chance to hit you." She turned her head to the rest of her teammates and nodded when she saw that Bowser was gesturing towards the staircase. The Moirai began their ascension up the stairs as their light and shadow wielding teammates followed from behind.

Now working their way up to the fifth floor, the Moirai were starting to really feel the effects of fatigue wear on them. Andrew, Ramona, and Warra were all either low on energy or completely depleted, and the rest were still pretty banged up from not just the Deyanira battle but from the cumulative stress they had endured since they began their great mission. Nevertheless, they continued onward. Even though they succeeded in restoring the elements to their natural

state, they knew very well that there was no telling what Elkon would have in store for the world should he be given the time to formulate a new plan. And not only that, but there was no telling what Grekka's involvement with Elkon would mean for the Moirai, the world, or even Grekka himself. They all continued up the stairs with growing urgency, attempting to seize the opportunity being presented to them to end their daunting expedition once and for all and to remove the ominous cloak that had been cast over the planet by the foe they had done their best to stand against without ceasing.

The Moirai came up out of the winding staircase to step onto the fifth floor and encountered a large, towering block of concrete and asphalt. It was already a very strange feature to have in an otherwise empty room, especially considering that it had nubby arms and legs and a giant face taking up a vast majority of the space of its flat side.

"HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO DEAL WITH YOU DAMNED HUMANS?!" the Whomp King boomed. "EVERY TIME I TURN AROUND, YOU STEP ON US WHOMPS! EVERY TIME WE GO TO SLEEP, YOU STEP ON US WHOMPS! EVERY TIME YOU NEED TO GET TO A HIGH PLACE, YOU STEP ON US WHOMPS! EVERY TIME YOU WAGE WAR WITH EACH OTHER – YOU ROLL YOUR VEHICLES OVER US! HA! YOU THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO SAY 'YOU STEP ON US' FOR THAT LAST ONE DIDN'T YOU? WELL TOO BAD! YOU STILL DO ANYWAYS!"

"Oh c'mon, we don't have time for this," Bowser muttered, shaking his head.

"YOU!" the Whomp King hollered, pointing it's disproportionately small arm at Daisy. "HOW DARE YOU MOCK ME, TINY HUMAN!"

"What?" Daisy asked with a raised eyebrow. "I... I didn't say anythi-"

"TIME TO CRUSH!" the Whomp King bellowed. The large whomp jumped up and slammed itself down on Daisy with all its might, attempting to literally flatten the Moirai of Earth. It would have succeeded had Daisy not caught it before she was squashed. The Whomp King grunted and wriggled its stubby arms and legs around as Daisy held him overhead, her hands resting on where the

whomp's cheeks were supposed to be.

"STRONG HUMAN!" the Whomp King shouted in surprise. It kept trying to force itself down on top of Daisy, but the earth wielder's strength held firm.

"I do a lot of overhead pressing!" Daisy said as she tossed the whomp off to the side. A loud boom was created as a result of the Whomp King crashing onto the floor. Oddly enough, the Whomp King continued to wriggle its feeble limbs in an attempt to try and get up. Unfortunately for the whomp, its efforts were not making any progress.

"HEY! CAN SOMEBODY HELP ME UP?!" the Whomp King yelled, its voice muffled on account of it lying on its face.

"Nah...you just stay there," said Marut.

"You could probably use the time to chill out a bit," Athelstan added as the Moirai all headed for the steps leading to the sixth floor.

"I SWEAR," the Whomp King began, still wriggling its arms and legs. "IF YOU STEP ON ME, WE ARE GOING TO HAVE SERIOUS ISSUES!"

"Oh – for the love of chain chomps, just shut up!" Bowser scowled from up the coiling staircase.

The seven elemental wielders ascended all the way up the stairs to finally reach the sixth and final floor, the site of Ramona and Andrew's previous confrontation with Elkon. However, Elkon himself was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Grekka was sitting on the other side of the room where another staircase was that likely led to the roof. The ice wielder seemed to be in deep meditation, the Master Pendant glowing as brilliantly as ever around his neck. The moment Grekka sensed the presence of his former teammates however, his eyes snapped wide open. He stared down the Moirai with a piercing gaze and an even unfriendlier frown.

"Grekka," Daisy murmured with a subtle smile.

"Back off," Grekka suddenly snarled before Daisy had a chance to

say anything more. He shot to his feet to stand tall against the seven assembled before him.

"No! You listen to us!" Warra shouted. "You are supposed to be helping us stop Elkon, not help Elkon lay waste to humanity!"

"Humanity," Grekka mumbled in mounting frustration. "The inhumane humanity. Those people, who treated me like a monster; all those who mocked me before, then cowered in fear, accusing me of being nothing but a threat to their existence?... I'll gladly aid in laying waste to humanity. I've had to endure ridicule and abuse, I've had the very people around me threaten to kill me should I 'step out of line,' I've had to withstand constant rejection from my own family, and for what? For me to go and play a part in saving a race that never wanted me alive in the first place?"

"That was in Kareah!" Daisy exclaimed. "How do you know the rest of the world would've treated you the same way?"

"Because," said Grekka. "The rest of the world is filled with humans. The rest of the world is filled with suffering. The rest of the world is filled with oppression, famine, poverty, war; all the result of mankind's treatment of one another."

A dimensional portal opened beside Grekka through which Elkon emerged to stand alongside the ice wielder against the Moirai. Elkon promptly closed his portal and stretched an arm up to the ceiling to create a larger portal overhead.

"And I'm sick to my soul of being classified along with you humans," Grekka finished.

"Grekka, you don't really mean what you're saying, do you?" said Warra, trying to reason with the ice wielder.

"Why would he not?" Elkon replied.

"I should not have demonstrated so much restraint in the past...so I won't now," said Grekka. "Humanity deserves to be wiped out, for the sake of the other races and species on the planet that do not share the same self-destructive, insecure, and greedy ways of

mankind."

"Who have you been talking too?" Daisy asked with angst. "Who has put these ideas in your head? It was Elkon, wasn't it?" She turned to the blue-robed figure and suddenly became very angry. "Why did you brainwash Grekka?"

"I haven't done anything," said Elkon. "Grekka has merely accepted the truth and has come to terms with the role he will play in rescuing the planet from the evil of man. You have ignorantly and stubbornly foiled my plan of elemental corruption, but that has done nothing but ensure mankind's demise; a demise that Grekka here has more than willingly decided to bring about on his own." The ice wielder's eyes flashed a glossy sheen in confirmation of Elkon's statement.

"What do you mean?!" Bowser anxiously asked.

"With the Master Pendant adorned on his neck, Grekka will wipe out every last human on the planet," said Elkon. "But for you all – especially you, Bowser – I have something special planned..."

The portal overhead dropped a large pile of bones, cartilage, chitin, and miscellaneous minerals on the ground in front of Elkon and Grekka. The Master Pendant began to glow and zapped a translucent pink ray at Bowser, not eliciting pain but encircling and smothering the koopa. The ray then returned to the gem briefly before radiating outwards all over the pile of connective tissues and fading away.

The pile shifted and stirred, slowly building itself up into a skeleton roughly mimicking the appearance of Bowser. Even the Koopa King's shell and his shoulder and wrist guards were copied and constructed, all in a denser, more fibrous combination of skeletal material. The bony body looked like a much more menacing version of Bowser, displaying harder and stronger horns. Its arms were about twice the length of its legs, and the spikes on its shell were a sickly brown and wickedly curved. Through the orbits of its skull, two eerily bright blue spheres shone. It was lifeless – it was dry – and yet, it was animated.

"What just happened?!" asked Marut, mouth agape.

"The Master Pendant just demonstrated one of its abilities," Elkon replied. "The ability that Grekka just used takes an image of one being and projects it onto lifeless masses while imbuing the mass with artificial life."

"You can't be serious," Bowser grumbled, eyeing down his skeletal copy.

"Sounds very much like an immoral power to me," Ramona thought aloud.

"I didn't even know there was such a power to begin with!" said Athelstan.

"Oh, these Pendants of Power have been in circulation for quite sometime now," Elkon responded. "However, the vast majority of them were lost throughout the planet back during the beginning of civilization. Of course, I know how you people don't care for ancient scriptures; so why am I wasting my breath trying to inform you?"

"Pendants of Power..." Athelstan mumbled in intrigue. "I don't think the Kallantown Archives even have anything on that..."

"Dry Bowser!" Elkon boomed at the animated skeleton. "Kill them all. Whether it's through decapitation, impalement, exsanguination, or however else; I don't care how you do it, just kill them all." He turned to the ice wielder beside him. "Come along now, so we can get you started on your objective." Elkon then floated up to the opening in the ceiling at the top of the stairs that led to the roof. Dry Bowser began to move and lumber several steps toward the center of the room before coming to a halt.

"Grekka!" Daisy barked. "You better not follow him up there!"

The white-clothed fighter eyed down Daisy but was quiet for a few moments. When he did speak, he coldly responded, "...Just die."

Daisy gasped, her lips quivering with disbelief. The harshness in her former teammate's tone was evident among everyone, but was particularly clear in Daisy's ears. She had not known him for long at all, she knew that, but she was still beyond upset with the way

Grekka was behaving. And yet, she understood completely why Grekka was showing such bitterness and hostility. It was through her empathy that she developed the determination to try to get through to the ice wielder, a determination that rivaled the drive that she carried to complete the Moirai's mission and stop Elkon from succeeding in his ultimate goal. Grekka's Master Pendant glowed before Daisy could say anything more, granting him the ability to levitate upwards and towards the top of the winding staircase that opened up to the roof.

"Since when can Grekka fly?" asked Athelstan.

"It's that pendant," said Andrew. "There's no mistaking that Grekka's gotten a boost from that pendant in more ways than one!"

I need to go after them! Daisy thought. "You all stay here!" she told her teammates as she made a move for the staircase.

"I don't think so!" Warra asserted, taking off to follow the earth wielder. Marut dashed to follow Daisy as well.

Athelstan snatched Warra's wrist to prevent the blue-clothed fighter from pursuing her. "You don't have much energy left at all," he said to Warra. "You'd better stay here. Let Marut go with her."

Daisy bolted up the stairs to get to the roof, but unknowingly caught the attention of Dry Bowser. To guard against anyone from following Elkon and Grekka, Dry Bowser opened its mouth and created a Concussion Flameball. Daisy saw the brilliant blue flames gathering in the far side of her peripheral vision prepared herself to make a possible counter or retaliation, but she sensed Dry Bowser's technique getting exponentially more powerful the longer the skeleton charged it. If Dry Bowser managed to fire off that attack, no amount of endurance or preventative measures would be able to protect her from likely getting blasted to death. Luckily for Daisy, Bowser threw a fireball of his own at Dry Bowser's head to break the undead koopa's flow of energy, thereby dispelling the Concussion Flameball and allowing Daisy the chance to get to the roof.

"Thanks, Bowser!" Daisy yelled back with a thumbs up.

Bowser gave a subtle salute and then redirected his attention to Dry Bowser. "Alright, you're dealing with me!"

Chapter XXXII

Sustained by Hate :

"Grekka!" Daisy yelled as she darted onto the rooftop. Elkon and Grekka both turned around and then leapt backwards to the far side opposite the Moirai of Earth. The circular, featureless rooftop of the tower was surrounded all around by a six foot tall wall. The ice wielder did not respond to the call of his name. After a couple seconds of silence, Marut ran up and stood behind Daisy.

"C'mon, Grekka," Daisy solemnly urged. "You gotta come to your senses-"

"I have come to my senses," replied Grekka. "I'm doing now what I should've done all along – I'm carrying out my true purpose. I'm the destructor that will bring about the end of man."

"And I shall serve as his guidance," said Elkon.

"No! You – shut up!" Daisy snapped. "Just shut up! You've done enough already!"

"My work will never be done until your kind has paid its debts to the planet and its inhabitants," Elkon coldly responded.

"Did you hear me?" Daisy sternly asked before rage surfaced. "I'VE HAD IT WITH YOU!" In a near instant, she darted forward, heading straight for Elkon to land a crushingly heavy smash punch on the dark being. However, she got cut off right as she was about to make her attack on Elkon by Grekka, whose eyes flashed as he struck a powerful hooking kick into Daisy's waist to knock her far off to the side. She furiously twisted out of the hitstun and snapped her body like a whip to slow her horizontal speed down so she could make a controlled, soft landing. Grekka maintained a heavy frown, an expression that displayed anger, hatred, and sadness all at the same time as the Master Pendant continued to shine around his neck.

"Very good, Grekka," said Elkon. "Now, correct me if I'm mistaken, but your gesture just now leads me to believe that you would like to be the one to slay the earth wielder?"

Grekka turned his eyes without moving his head and nodded at Elkon, then redirected his vision at Daisy. Marut stood back near the staircase, unable to say anything.

"Grekka, we're supposed to be fighting Elkon, not each other!" Daisy yelled in fury.

The ice wielder did not respond, but stepped forward as Elkon stepped back. Using a great deal of elemental energy along with the Master Pendant, he assembled two thick towers of ice four times his own height split to his left and right. He then pounded his chest with a fist before using that same hand to point at Daisy. "Fight...or surrender. Your death will be the same. Your fate is sealed."

"Are you serious..." said Daisy, her voice drastically lowering in tone. "...You really want to kill me?"

"All of you," said Grekka. "Every last one of you." The ice wielder's unhappiness was more than evident.

"I don't believe that, Grekka..." Daisy somberly murmured as she started to transform. Her skin began to darken and glow, her hair stiffened outwards, and her talon markings reappeared under her now golden eyes as her energy production skyrocketed. Nova Daisy stood and readied herself into her total-offensive stance, her eyes partially occluded by her hair jutting out in front of her forehead.

"I don't believe you at all," Daisy then said. Grekka said nothing back and instead crossed his arms, his palms open and facing the towers of ice.

"So this is how you were able to get past Kokoro..." Elkon said with subtle intrigue. "I have not seen anyone able to use the Nova Transformation in quite a while, especially not without turning into a proverbial monster."

Daisy ignored Elkon and kept her eyes centered on Grekka. The

earth and ice wielders fiercely stared each other down. *I can't afford to give it anything less than my best here* , she thought. *Grekka was the most powerful one out of our group before he left, and this journey has worn down all of us...so I have to use the Nova Form. I just can't avoid using it; not here. My opponent is going to be too much if I do...*

"This is a most unexpected development indeed," Elkon continued. "However, you'll find that the powers of Grekka's Master Pendant will render your transformation meaningless."

Daisy gave no response, so Elkon went on speaking. "There's no mistaking that the Nova Form is a most impressive ability, but it is nothing that Grekka can't handle now that he has the Master Pendant." He narrowed his eyes and shifted his tone to address the wearer of the powerful gem. "I do expect that you'll execute each one of them, Grekka."

"You don't need to tell me that," the ice wielder responded. "I said I would. It's what I intend to do."

"Well, just to be sure, I'd like to stay and watch," said Elkon, levitating up into the air to get a good overview of the rooftop. "I assure you, I won't have any role in this. The outcome here is all up to you, Grekka."

"Be careful...Daisy..." Marut murmured.

"You know it's not too late, Grekka," Daisy gently said. "You can still stop all this and rejoin us so we can all take down Elkon together. We can help you put your angst and pain behind you."

Grekka kept his focus on his great columns of ice, the whole rooftop without sound for several moments. The white-clothed fighter then suddenly broke the silence, quietly remarking, "So that's it?"

Daisy did not give any reaction, unsure what to say regarding her former teammate's statement.

"What a waste of last words..." Grekka muttered, thrusting both of his arms forward. The two towers of ice came rushing forward at

Daisy and stopped at her sides. Grekka clamped his open hands into fists, prompting the masses of ice to close in and crush Daisy. However, the earth wielder used her exceptional strength and quickness to catch the ice with her hands the moment she noticed that the masses were closing on her. The boost from the Master Pendant added extra force, efficiency, and precision to Grekka's control over the ice, but Daisy made full use of her own boost from the Nova Form to prevent from being sandwiched between the masses. Grekka continued trying to force the ice to crush Daisy, yet the Moirai of Earth kept strong and held the columns at arms length. Marut and Elkon both watched, anxious and relaxed respectively. Daisy was doing the best she could to hold off the ice, but Grekka was unrelenting in his manipulation of his element and pressed his efforts to force the columns together with even more energy than before.

What the hell is with that Master Pendant? Daisy screamed in her mind. Her teeth clenched as she slowly began to falter from the ever increasing pressure of the two masses of ice. *Damn, I'm going to have to dig deep for this one – and we just started!* With her arms folding and the ice coming ever closer to flattening her in her entirety, Daisy shuttled seismic energy into the ice to shake the masses apart into thousands of fragments.

"Alright! Nice one!" Marut cheered.

Grekka stood, somewhat hunched over, disguising the irritation he felt from his failed attack. Still, he had some satisfaction from seeing Daisy's struggle with the ice.

Elkon slowly clapped as he watched from up in the air. "Well done, Grekka. Very well done... What's wrong Daisy? Don't tell me that you're tired already! Don't tell me that the great Nova Form is proving to be inferior to Grekka and the Master Pendant!"

Daisy, panting heavily, regained her breath and straightened out her posture. "We'll see," she calmly replied.

The Moirai watched with baited breath to see how their teammate,

Bowser, would fare against Dry Bowser. The undead skeleton made in his image audibly emitted smoke from its mouth with each "exhale" it took.

"Are you sure you've got this, Bowser?" asked Ramona.

"Positive," said Bowser, despite the somber expression on his face. It appeared as if the Koopa King was not all too present, deep in thought rather than completely focused on his opponent. *Now where have I seen this before,* Bowser wondered in his mind, referring to his skeletal counterpart. *Oh...that's right. This guy was me in the dreams I had that got me started on this adventure in the first place... It was the outcome of what happened when I was burned alive... How ironic.*

"I wish I wasn't so low on energy," Warra mumbled in a defeated tone.

"How do ya think I feel," Andrew replied in nearly the same demeanor.

"Relax, he's got this," said Athelstan. "No undead pile of bones is going to beat Bowser. It's just not gonna happen!"

In the standoff against Dry Bowser, Bowser seemed to be alert but was still partially absent at the same time. *I know how that feels, Grekka,* the Moirai of Fire mused. *Getting treated like a monster; it's not fair. I can understand. It's a shame that you've let yourself succumb to the image that everyone else had placed upon you... And now, looking at this skeletal copy of myself, I'm reminded of what people have thought of me for so long, of the image that people created of me...the image of a monster that I myself played a huge role in justifying and that for a while, I thought I would have to succumb to in order to ensure the revival of the Koopa Clan. As I stand now, I see a lifeless monster that has no purpose other than to stand in my way and hinder me from progressing further. It's a monster that I must destroy, once and for all.* The koopa flared up large fireballs in each of his hands. *And in doing so, put my all hatred to rest.*

Dry Bowser roared a ghoulish howl that reverberated throughout the

room. Bowser chucked his fireballs at the undead skeleton and then quickly flared an extra two, tossing those as well. All four struck home since Dry Bowser was slow to react. The hits from the four fireballs left charred marks on Dry Bowser's torso, but otherwise didn't seem to bother the skeleton too much.

The undead being made another one of its Concussion Flameballs in its mouth and fired it off at Bowser, who countered with a fireball of equal intensity from his own mouth. The two bursts of fire clashed in the middle of the room, kicking up a large but brief cloud of smoke and embers. Through the cloud came a Concussion Flameball that Bowser could not block in time, yet the burst of blue fire struck the ground in front of Bowser rather than at the koopa himself. Strangely enough, the Concussion Flameball created a huge shockwave upon contact that blew Bowser – and the rest of the Moirai that were a good distance behind him – back and away.

Bowser hit the ground hard but bounced back onto his feet. Andrew, Ramona, and Warra all landed on their backs and stayed on the ground, too tired to get up. Athelstan got back to his feet and helped his teammates up, but they all kept as far back as they could to allow Bowser space to work with.

"Strange technique," Warra muttered.

"Dangerous technique," Ramona added.

Suddenly, Dry Bowser raised its right arm straight out to the side. Crackling and shifting became audible, accompanying a grotesque scene that began to unfold. Cartilaginous tendrils, followed by thick, dense, white collagenous fibers formed and grew over Dry Bowser's outstretched arm. The skeletal arm was being fortified with even more bone and cartilage that slowly but surely grew the limb in length, mass, and thickness as it emitted an incredibly disturbing sound akin to that of metal being bent and compressed. The newer bone tissue that formed around Dry Bowser's arm somehow contorted and twisted in all directions as it continued growing and expanding outwards. By the time Dry Bowser was finished, its right arm had become twice the length of its left arm and considerably thicker. The elongated limb barely had any gaps, forming what resembled an excessively thick lance. The breathing from the

skeletal body grew heavier, its eyes focused entirely on Bowser.

"What a sight..." Andrew said under his breath.

Bowser was inclined to say something smart, yet kept his restraint and didn't make any special remark of any kind. The koopa just smiled instead, preparing his special Fanning Torch fireball and dropping it on the ground in the direction of Dry Bowser. Upon getting near Dry Bowser, the green ball of fire opened itself up and sprayed out an intense wave of flames at the undead skeleton. The bones of Bowser's opponent became even more charred, but didn't experience much else. Through the flames, Dry Bowser leapt up into the air and aimed its lance arm at Bowser. The Koopa King rolled to the side in time to evade the skeleton's thrust, causing Dry Bowser to stab into the ground. Amazingly, its lance arm struck clean into the floor. It took a bit of wriggling around and forceful jerking for Dry Bowser to free itself from the ground. Bowser threw out a large fireball at the throat of the undead skeleton, once again causing damage to the bony body, but nothing more. Dry Bowser did not so much as stumble or show any signs of damage or pain aside from the burn marks on its bones, but backtracked to the side of the room opposite the Moirai.

"Unreal – it's not even acknowledging that it was hit!" Andrew said in awe.

"That thing must be indestructible!" Ramona exclaimed.

"Oh, enough of this already!" Bowser hastily cried out, jumping up into the air. His trusty Whirling Fortress move turned out to be sufficient enough to not only dismantle the body of his skeleton opponent but also to knock the head off of it as well, the sound of shattering glass and crashing plastic audible for the several seconds it took for all the pieces of Dry Bowser to come to rest. The Koopa King leapt back to his side of the room, content with the results of his attack.

"Well, that was effective," stated Warra.

"How's that for indestructible!" said Bowser, hands on his hips.

The four Moirai behind Bowser stood motionless and without reaction. None of them appeared to be very delighted even though Dry Bowser was reduced to pieces on the floor.

Bowser turned around to face his teammates when he noticed that they weren't saying anything. "...What?" he asked.

"I take it back," said Warra, pointing to Dry Bowser's head. "Maybe not so effective..."

The Moirai of Fire turned back around to see that the bright blue eyeballs of Dry Bowser were still lit inside its head despite the fact that the skull was on the ground and not connected to any part of its deconstructed body.

"So the head thing..." Bowser muttered.

"Yeah..." Andrew replied.

"What does that mean?" Ramona quietly asked.

Almost miraculously, the skull and all the bones of Dry Bowser pulled together to reform, its lance arm reverted back to normal. The undead skeleton looked none the worse from its apparent destruction, aside from minor amounts of loose, ground up bone powder from a handful of almost unnoticeable areas of itself that were fractured too finely to be repaired.

"Okay! So *that* just happened!" Andrew remarked.

"Well *that* sucks," said Athelstan.

"One of us will die here," Grekka solemnly affirmed.

"I don't think so," said Daisy. "Neither of us have to die here. This fight...it shouldn't be happening."

"You're right," Grekka replied. "It should've been over by now." Two long, thin icicles shot up from the sleeves of his jacket, were caught near the middle of their shafts, and were thrown at the Moirai of

Earth all in one swift motion. Daisy nimbly backflipped a short distance up into the air just to make sure she could clear the incoming shards of ice. While in midair however, she did not notice Grekka rushing towards her. The moment she came out of her flip, Grekka, twin forearm machetes unsheathed, had come within ten yards of her, closing fast. She just managed to contort her body out of the way of the dual stab Grekka made at her. Through her vision, she saw the menacing look of hatred and bloodlust contained within his eyes as she maneuvered her way around him.

Grekka spun around and began slashing his blades at Daisy, one after the other with blazing speed and precision. Daisy dodged each swing with equally blazing quickness and anticipation. Grekka's blades accounted for dozens of swings, but all of them missed.

Marut watched, adrenaline surging and pumping, while Elkon viewed the fight from above with the same emotionless expression the Moirai had all grown accustomed to seeing from him. Grekka was getting in at least two swipes of his blades per second, Daisy evading each one with no margin for error. Immediately after dodging yet another slash, Daisy propelled herself backwards to create some distance. Grekka shot several bolts of frost from his tools, all of which Daisy cut and sidestepped around. The ice wielder continued firing off more bursts of ice elementals at the Moirai of Earth.

Damn it – if I don't get a chance to attack, then I'm not going to win this fight at all! Daisy yelled in her mind as she continued dodging the incoming ice blasts.

Grekka is going to rip her apart , Elkon thought. "It's too bad, Daisy," he then called out. "It's very rare to get an opportunity to see someone go Nova. It's a pity such capabilities are going to go to waste with your demise."

Suddenly, the Master Pendant took on an intense glow. Grekka cut off his blasts as he fell down to the ground, wide-eyed and screaming.

"Grekka! What's wrong?!" Daisy worriedly shouted over Grekka's cries of discomfort. "Is it that pendant? Speak to me! Tell me

something!"

"Well...I was not expecting that at all," Elkon said with surprise.

"What do you mean you weren't expecting it?" Daisy furiously growled. "Didn't you give that pendant to him?"

"Yes," Elkon said without hesitation. Grekka was hunched over on his knees and elbows, the Master Pendant's glow now spreading to the choker around his neck that it was attached to. After a few moments, Grekka's screams quieted down. Daisy and Marut watched as the ice wielder forced himself back onto his feet, his entire body violently trembling. The Master Pendant had dimmed but maintained a consistent faint glow, and the choker through which it was attached to appeared to be bound to his neck with impossible tightness. His eyes carried excessive strain, and thick veins were visible all throughout the areas of his body that his clothing didn't cover. His hoarse breathing made him sound...different.

"Elkon!" Daisy howled in anger. "You better start explaining this!"

"I...can't...feel myself!" Grekka croaked.

"Elkon!" Daisy repeated.

"I did not account for this!" Elkon responded. "Don't accuse me of anything like I know what's going on here!"

"You've known practically everything else up to this point!" exclaimed Marut.

"Well I don't know this!" Elkon shouted. "No Pendant of Power should be eliciting effects such as those that we are witnessing now!"

Daisy didn't say anything further, instead refocusing her attention to Grekka. The ice wielder appeared to be in great pain trying to even move.

What does this development mean? Elkon wondered. *Has the Master Pendant been...tainted? I was definitely not expecting something like this to happen...*

Although slow,Grekka regained his composure. He did not appear to be any more comfortable, but the turmoil that he had been displaying had quieted down. The white-clothed fighter began focusing his energy through his forearm machetes once more, signaling his intentions of continuing the battle.

"After all that, you're still going to fight..." said the Moirai of Earth, her voice trailing off.

Grekka didn't reply for several moments, but eventually just barely managed to say, "Yes... You will fight me. And you will lose..."

No matter, Elkon concluded in his thoughts. *It appears the outcome will still be the same. Grekka will dispose of them all one by one.*

Dry Bowser had been utterly defeated.

In fact, the undead skeleton had been utterly defeated so many times that Athelstan lost count. But each time, Dry Bowser crumbled and fell apart just to reassemble moments later. Bowser had burned off a good portion of the modest amount of energy he had been able to replenish after the fight against Deyanira just to accomplish next to nothing other than the discoloration of the skeleton's bones and random dents in its body. Sweat beading down his head, the Moirai of Fire was well aware that the time it would take to chip away at Dry Bowser would be considerably longer than his body would be able to hold up for. Unfortunately for him, the undead skeleton would not give him much of any sort of respite other than the time it took for the skeleton to reconstruct itself each time it was destroyed. So when the once more rebuilt Dry Bowser readied another Concussion Flameball in its mouth and fired it off at Bowser, the Koopa King put out a Tavado blast to counter in hopes of at least being able to defend himself from what could potentially be a devastating blow. Half of the flying flame torpedos collided with Dry Bowser's blue fire towards the center of the room while the other half ran past the collision and struck Dry Bowser head on. Bowser was just out of reach of the damaging shock waves that the Concussion Fireball's explosion released.

I have to beat this monster , Bowser thought. *Beating this particular monster means a lot more than anyone here knows.*

When everything settled, Dry Bowser stood. The bursts of the Tavado that pounded the undead skeleton left larger marks of charred and disintegrated bone along its shoulders and torso than Bowser's previous fire-based attacks.

"C'mon Bowser, you've got to figure out something," Athelstan said under his breath.

"Is there anything he can do now?" Ramona thought aloud. "So far, this skeleton has proven to be very durable!"

"There is one thing I can try," said Bowser, taking note of the charred marks on Dry Bowser that weren't repaired. Bowser focused the lion's share of his remaining elemental fire energy into his claws and formed spheroids of plasma. *I don't have a lot of energy left,* he thought. *But i f I can't destroy it now, I'll never be able to destroy it. It'll destroy me* .

Dry Bowser's body began to shift and tremble. Two limbs, each the same height and twice the width of its body violently sprouted up from just above its shoulders. The shape of the limbs appeared to be a combination of wings, shells, and giant hands. Once the appendages formed and hardened, Dry Bowser crossed them in front of his body to act as shields against Bowser's attack.

" No – this attack must not fail!" the Moirai of Fire screamed, forcing every last bit of energy he had left into the plasma humming in his hands. "I have to be willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that this monster isn't allowed to live on – for the betterment of everyone!" The plasma burst into even larger pulses of energy, forcing Bowser to abduct his arms as he closed his eyes in intense focus. The Koopa King calmed himself and utilized his prowess with the fire element to the fullest, making his plasma as powerful as he could with the little energy that he had. "Engulf in the perilous heat...and torch to ashes... Fire up to plasma...and bring about the necessary change." His eyes shot open. "Now, there is no turning back."

"Hey, what exactly is Bowser saying?" asked Athelstan.

You're not entirely referring to that skeleton, are you, Bowser? Warra thought.

"This is gonna be big!" Andrew hollered.

This is all I have left , Bowser thought, bringing his hands forward to point at Dry Bowser. *I hope you enjoy it.* Plasma shot through the air with great speed, bursting through Dry Bowser's defenses and erupting into a bright explosion all around the skeleton. Crumbling, rippling, searing, baking, smoldering; the sounds in the room took precedence over the occluding colors taking over everyone's vision.

And then, quiet. The sounds ceased, followed by the clearing of the room. Dry Bowser still stood, in the same exact position it was in before, except its shielding limbs were gone and its entire body was now a very dark, burnt brown. The organic materials of the skeleton, what had given the bones their shape, density, and durability, were all stripped away as a result of the extreme temperature of Bowser's plasma. The skeleton did not move in the least, and eventually began to crumble from top to bottom. A large pile of ashy material made up the remains of the skeletal body, now unable to rebuild itself. Dry Bowser had been vanquished; permanently, this time.

"It's done," Bowser murmured. His teammates walked forward to stand with him.

"Nice cremation," said Andrew.

"Nice light show," Ramona added.

"How are you feeling, Bowser?" asked Warra.

"I'm feeling...well," the Koopa King said. "I'm feeling real well."

"But you're entirely out of energy," said the Moirai of Water.

"I know," Bowser replied with a subtle smile.

"Ya did good, buddy," Athelstan praised, patting the koopa on his shell. "Very good stuff!"

"Let's move up to the roof now," said Warra. "Be prepared for whatever we might end up walking into."

"One can only imagine," Andrew muttered.

The five elemental wielders made their way for the staircase that led to the roof, where Daisy and Marut had followed Elkon and Grekka to. Bowser took up the rear as they ascended the stairs. A state of surreal calm overtook him that he wasn't sure he had ever actually experienced before.

I've beaten this monster, the Moirai of Fire thought. *So now what happens?*

"This isn't you, Grekka," Daisy said to the ice wielder. "I've only known you for a short while, but I know enough about you to know that you don't want to fight here and that you don't want to kill."

"You're pretty adamant about getting Grekka back on your side, aren't you?" Elkon said from above when Grekka didn't respond.

"Forget about who's on who's side," Daisy solemnly responded. "I just don't want him heading down a path he doesn't belong on."

Again, no response came from Grekka. His energy was still flowing freely through his implements, looking ready to leap out at any moment.

"Remember who you are," Daisy urged with softness. "If you don't, you'll end up doing things that we both know you're going to regret, and you'll be lost forever."

"...Why should anyone care who I am?" Grekka muttered in mild annoyance. "Why should anyone care what happens to me? Why should anyone even notice if I were to die?"

"Because, I'm your friend!" Daisy sternly answered. "We're all your friends! And we have a duty we *all* need to attend to!"

"I don't have friends," Grekka spat out. "I never had friends. They

were all enemies and adversaries that wanted to kill me. Everyone now is an enemy that wants to kill me, waiting to strike me down behind my back. But now I realize I have to kill them before they can kill me."

Before Daisy could say anything more, Grekka thrust his blades forward, sending a wide and thick wave of frost at her. The only way to go was up, and that's where she went to avoid the crippling freeze. Her short jump just barely escaped the top portion of the icy burst. The ice wielder did not attack her while she was airborne, instead allowing her to gently touch back down onto the ground. It was then that Grekka rushed forward with his blades, stabbing and slicing with chaotic accuracy. Daisy had to move, cut, and twist even faster than before to evade the frantic slashes.

"Relentless..." Elkon said in observance. Marut bit into his lip with anxiousness.

Grekka cutoff his frenzied swipes and made one large horizontal swing with both blades at Daisy that swept in front of him in a half circle, prompting the Moirai of Earth to jump into a backflip to dodge what would have been a fatal hit. After a couple backwards somersaults to carry her through the air, Daisy landed on the ground roughly fifteen yards away from Grekka. She found herself needing to catch her breath after that brutal string of seemingly endless attacks from her opponent.

"I'm getting sick of you all, sick of everyone," Grekka snarled. "I'm sick of myself; that goes without saying."

He's even faster than before! Daisy remarked in her mind. *It's taking everything I've got just to make sure that I'm avoiding all of his attacks, and he's definitely not making his moves with the intent of keeping me alive. He's actually hellbent on killing me, and if I make the wrong move at any point in time, that's exactly what he's going to do!* She clenched her teeth, a fierce expression plastered on her face. *I can't mess up! Or I'm finished!*

Chapter XXXIII

Faceless :

Bowser, Athelstan, Warra, Ramona, and Andrew all rushed up the stairs to the rooftop to join Marut, who was attentively watching the battle between Grekka and Daisy unfold. Except for Athelstan, all of them looked tired and weary. Regardless, Elkon did not look pleased with their appearance on the rooftop.

"Your pile of bones is gone!" Bowser yelled at the dark being. "You're next."

"I beg to differ," said Elkon. "Grekka will deal with you; after he has demolished Daisy, that is. So you will all stay where you are if you wish to cling to as many of your last few moments of life as you can. If any of you intervene, you'll all have to deal with my Dimensional Saber and you will be sent someplace you will *never* be able to return from, a place where you will wish you were dead..."

"Go ahead and try!" Athelstan exclaimed, readying his halberd.

"Just stay back," Daisy quickly ordered to her teammates. "Please."

"For what?" Athelstan snapped. "He's asking for it!"

"Let's trust her," said Marut. "I've been watching her fight against Grekka. We need to stay back."

Varying degrees of angst and sadness overcame the Moirai when they heard that Daisy and Grekka had been locked in battle. Even though most of them had somewhat expected as much to come about after witnessing Grekka attack Rosalina, they were still unpleasantly surprised, disturbed, and most of all, disappointed to now know for certain that their former teammate now stood against them.

"So they're both asking for it then," Athelstan said in somber self-correction.

"Daisy's the only one right now who stands a chance against beating Grekka," said Marut. "He's become very powerful! It's got something to do with that weird pendant around his neck!"

"He must be if Daisy's facing him in Nova Form," Warra murmured.

"...I don't want any of you guys to take part in this," asserted Daisy, solemn in her tone. "That's all there is to it. This is between Grekka and I; Elkon himself said he's not going to enter this battle."

Suddenly, Grekka raised his blades up into the air to form a large block of ice. The Master Pendant glowed intensely, coinciding with the increase in size of the frozen mass. All eyes were drawn high overhead to the ice that expanded to colossal proportions as a result of Grekka's influence. It hovered in the air for a few moments after it finished growing, with no one sure of what Grekka intended to do with it.

I'm the only one who can handle this, Daisy thought. *And it's got nothing to do with my Nova power.*

A thundering crack echoed through the air, reverberating along the rooftop. The massive block of ice drifted apart into hundreds of icicles and shards. Grekka waved one of his blades, aiming all the sharp and pointed pieces of ice directly at Daisy.

"You better think of something quick, Daisy!" Warra called out.

The Moirai of Earth got in position for her Seismic Wave technique. Instead of aiming her attack horizontally as she had done numerous times before, she spread her feet and angled her torso upwards to face the deadly ice. The air around her hands began rumbling and rattling with her seismic energies as she began her move.

"Is that your only defense?" Grekka asked in irritation. "Countering an attack with another attack? How one-dimensional." At the same time Grekka sent all of his ice down to tear his opponent to shreds, Daisy let her Seismic Wave loose. The seismic energy rampaged up into the air, widening its scope to counter against all of the plummeting ice. Her attack ripped through every one of the shards and icicles that came down, shattering them into harmless

fragments that eventually showered down around her. Unfortunately for Daisy, she was not aware of a huge burst of magnetized frost that came at the conclusion of her Seismic Wave. The Moirai of Earth was knocked back a considerable distance, forced to withstand a brutally hard hit and a jarring shock. She skidded to a stop with minimal distance between her and the wall behind her, surprised at how much energy Grekka released with his most recent attack.

I may have underestimated Grekka , Elkon thought. *Or maybe I underestimated these Pendants of Power. No, just the Master Pendant. With its boost, his power is increasing and coming very close to my own. Though, it seems that he has yet to demonstrate his full capacity as he stands now...* The dark being focused his gaze on Grekka. *And yet, this Master Pendant is very strange in its nature. I've never known any Pendant of Power to have the kinds of...invasive...effects that this one has demonstrated. I wonder if he's even able to take it off now.*

"You're all far too soft and forgiving towards the people on this planet," Grekka groused. "But of course, I don't expect you all to understand."

Daisy grimaced as she stared down her former teammate. *Those eyes* , she thought. *Eyes full of hate, full of loneliness, full of rage...despair... It's all bottled up inside of you, but it's all seeping out because you just can't hold it anymore. I've seen those very same eyes before...in myself. I'm looking in a mirror, a mirror that reflects more than any piece of glass could ever. I see from you what could have happened to me. That could very easily be me wearing the Master Pendant. This is why I'm the one who must stand against you Grekka, because I can feel everything that you're feeling. Even if you don't want me to, I can understand you.*

"You're all too weak," said Grekka. "Too weak to elicit any kind of change in this world. Continue to play your senseless game of duty. Enjoy your misguided mediocrity for the short time that you're all still alive, because I will not stop until every last one of you is dead."

Yes, Grekka, Elkon said in thought. *Unfortunately for you, once you've succeeded in bringing about the extinction of humanity, you'll*

have to die as well. I can not in good conscience allow you to freely roam the new world order of peace that I will institute. By the end of your task, you will be nothing more than a homicidal killing machine much in the same way that every human is now.

I remember how everyone hated me, Daisy thought in reminiscence, maintaining her stare into Grekka's eyes. *And how I hated all of them in return, not understanding why they disliked me so much. But you, you were hated from the day you were born. All you know is hatred, and now you want to release your hatred all across the planet. I wonder what I would be like if I allowed myself to succumb to that same hatred... What would I be like if I gave in to my despair?...*

"When the oppressed fight and destroy," Bowser mumbled. "Because they just can't take it anymore..."

"Grekka..." Ramona whimpered, her demeanor sullen and muted.

"Elkon! I see what you've done!" Daisy howled. "How dare you prey upon someone like that!"

"He joined me of his own accord," Elkon replied. "Just ask him."

Daisy turned her head back to the ice wielder. "I can tell you're not a violent person at all, Grekka. You've just been through so much that your hatred and angst is clouding your judgment. You don't want to fight at all, do you?"

Grekka didn't say anything at first, maintaining his angered gaze. After a few moments though, he took a deep breath and gave his response. "Even before Kokoro devastated my hometown, I never wanted to fight. I never liked fighting...but that's what I must do."

"No!" Daisy responded. "That's not what you must do! Remember what you're fighting for!"

"...Exactly," said Grekka. "You're no hero." He paused, shifting his gaze to the group of Moirai who stood near the staircase. "None of you are."

"What do you mean?!" Andrew asked in anger.

"The world isn't fair the way it is now," Grekka grumbled. "And yet you claim to be righteous and just when you're defending this unfairness and defending a society that promotes conflict and hatred. I've lived through enough of it all to know that your way is wrong. My whole existence I wished I was dead, but I could never bring myself to my own end. My whole existence was rejected and feared, but that is what you call righteous? If your so called 'destiny' is to further pain and suffering, then I don't want any part of it. Hatred and torment is all that exists in a world dominated by man."

"Yes, the world is a bad place, but that doesn't mean it can't be fixed," Daisy asserted. "It most certainly can and it most certainly will! It's a monumental task, but it's definitely not impossible." Her bold statement made Elkon perk up a little in surprise.

"And what gives you that idea?" Grekka snarled. "You think just because you're destined to bring about change and 'fix' the world, that you will?"

Uncomfortable silence pervaded the rooftop for a few moments. Daisy shifted her eyes to her teammates, sharing a look with each of them in turn before redirecting her attention back to her opponent.

"Well, *do you* ?" Grekka asked with frustration.

"We're not doing this because it's our destiny, Grekka," Daisy softly replied with a smile. "Maybe in the beginning we were, but not anymore. Our destiny is entirely subject to change, so how can we be doing something because destiny told us to? It took me a little while to figure it all out, but now I know. Now we all know. We're doing this because the world needs us to do it. We're taking it upon ourselves to right the wrong because there's wrong that must be righted...for the common good of all!"

Marut, Athelstan, Warra, Ramona, Andrew, and Bowser all gave reassuring glances and gestures to Daisy in confirmation of everything the Moirai of Earth had said. Grekka seemed to not take too well to the earth wielder's words, showing rapidly increasing angst and discomfort.

"I will not try to define myself as a hero – none of us will," Daisy

assured. "We're just doing what must be done, and if that means we have to get past you..." She paused, her expression darkening. "...Then so be it."

After a few seconds of quiet, Grekka oddly began laughing. None of the Moirai could make out why the ice wielder was, especially considering that it was completely out of character for Grekka to even be smiling. His laughing was definite and lively, but also strangely sinister. The now erratic laughter was offputting to everyone on the rooftop.

"Nonsense," Grekka griped in ascending volume. "You are all NONSENSE!"

At that moment, everyone on the rooftop, including Elkon, felt a strange energy that coincided with a strong bout of bioluminescence from the Master Pendant. Warra wasn't sure, but it sounded to him like Grekka's voice began to take on a multi-toned effect as he continued laughing. His laughter didn't last for long, and was cut short as he haphazardly fell to his knees in apparent agony.

"Not again..." Elkon muttered. "Am I going to get betrayed twice now?"

"Grekka, a-are you okay?" Ramona hesitantly asked.

The only things that seemed to be worse than Grekka's crippled appearance were his tormenting screams. He sounded as if he was losing his mind.

"Grekka!" Daisy yelled, running towards the ice wielder.

The moment she got close to Grekka, a large dome of energy emerged around him. A mere second later, the dome expanded outwards, blowing snow and frost all over the roof top and unleashing a painful chain of magnetic forces that zapped all who were present, including Grekka himself. Even Elkon, levitating up above the rooftop, was forcefully jolted and knocked down to the floor. By the time the energy and elementals came to a rest, everyone lay sprawled out on the rooftop.

Elkon was the first to return to his feet and immediately floated back up to his aerial perch, somewhat shaken with what had transpired. *The decision to fuse Antasma and Cackletta together was a bad move,* he thought. *But now with what Grekka has shown so far, was giving him the Master Pendant a mistake? Was attaining the Master Pendant at all a mistake? I don't understand; were all my decisions flawed to begin with?*

The Moirai all slowly picked themselves up off the ground, dusting off all the snow and icy material that stuck to them. Grekka was the last one to get up, shifting around once everyone else had regained their bearings and were back on their feet.

No, the Master Pendant has definitely been tainted, Elkon determined in his mind. *A Pendant of Power should not be eliciting such effects. One of the most formidable Pendants of Power has definitely been messed with by something...or someone. And I played the fool who passed it on to another person so that it could take hold of a body. If that's the case, then who's to say that I didn't already doom not only my mission but the entire planet as a whole too?*

Daisy stared at the ice wielder, startled to hear hauntingly heavy breathing from him. Grekka forced himself up to a hunched over posture, rage shining through his expression. The Master Pendant sparkled and blinked.

"Hey...buddy..." Daisy began, her voice trailing off.

Kill her! an ominous voice echoed in Grekka's mind. The ice wielder pulled his blades up into the air, focusing on the sheen of ice and snow on the rooftop. He crossed his tools together, consequently pulling all of the ice elementals inwards to crush Daisy. The Moirai of Earth leapt into the air at the last moment to avoid getting pulverized and landed just in front of her original position.

"Fight me!" Grekka screamed. "FIGHT ME!"

The mound of ice and snow behind Daisy rushed forward and slammed into her back, knocking her flat onto her stomach. The mass then rose high into the air and pulled in any remaining snow

scattered about on the rooftop as it split into several hundreds of smaller balls of ice. Grekka commanded the ice balls to fall at terminal velocity, one by one, striking Daisy in her back until there was no more ice up above her.

"What's the matter, Daisy?" Grekka scowled. "Great and mighty Moirai of Earth! Great Nova warrior! Why don't you FIGHT BACK?!"

That ice must have bruised my entire back, Daisy thought. She slowly pressed herself off the ground to stand up, wincing in dull pain. *I feel so numb and heavy there. He must've been looking to crush my spine. Thank goodness for my affinity to earth, or he would've done just that!*

"Looks like Grekka has fully succumbed to the influence of the Master Pendant," Elkon muttered. "Whatever that influence is."

"Like a volcano, all that he had suppressed is now raging to the surface," Bowser murmured.

The ice balls rose up into the air at various heights and angles behind Daisy. She turned around to face the array of ice elementals that began to shoot at her at harrowing speeds. With great agility, she contorted and twisted her body to evade each one and prevent any further damaging blows from accumulating. She staggered to a rest as she evaded the last of the icy projectiles, all of which shattered upon impact with the ground.

"Is that it?" Grekka bellowed. "Is that all you can do? You're better off running away!"

Daisy frowned and stood her ground once she saw Grekka running towards her, his forearm machetes charged and glowing. He closed the gap between them relatively quickly, dashing towards her in a straight and perfect line. Daisy swung her left leg up high with remarkable speed once Grekka got close enough, striking the ice wielder in the chin with exceptional force sufficient enough to propel him backwards and knock his twin forearm machetes free from his arms before he could slash through her. Managing to stay upright, Grekka's momentum came to a gradual halt as he dug his feet into the floor. His weapons came to a rest a short distance near him, yet

he did not bother to retrieve them.

"Interesting..." Grekka muttered before suddenly escalating his voice. "INTERESTING! VERY INTERESTING INDEED, DAISY!"

"What is happening to you, Grekka?!" Warra whispered in surprise. Daisy maintained her steely resolve and laser-like focus, doing everything she could to stand as firm as possible while trying to avoid evoking any further increase in Grekka's growing instability.

"I believe I said something earlier," stated Grekka. He grunted and groaned, hatred overtaking his body, mind, heart, and spirit. "One of us *will* die here!"

Daisy's eyes closed as she took a deep breath. "Not like this, Grekka. Not like this..."

"Gonna have to kill him," Andrew mumbled. "I'd hate to have to do so, but he's going to rampage all over the planet if we let him live."

"Yeah..." Warra sullenly agreed. "It's unfortunate."

"We've got to do what must be done," Ramona said, her words grim.

No, you guys, Daisy urged in her mind. *That's not what we need to do here.*

"I see," Grekka groused, peering at his former teammates. "I was right all along. You're all conspiring against me, all of you were from the beginning." Tears starting to stream heavily from his eyes, he turned around to face Elkon. "Who's to say *you're* not plotting against me?"

Elkon flustered a bit while he levitated in the air, giving no response. Grekka took the lack of a reply as a reply in an of itself.

"The world is full of nothing but savages and barbarians," Grekka growled, turning back to Daisy. "Full of nothing but greedy elitists who want to gain power and control over everything; the same people who will stomp all over whoever gets in their way. The only way to put an end to this eternally perpetuating cycle of suffering and madness is to put an end to it all myself." He thrust his right arm

forward. "And that can only be accomplished by the obliteration of all lifeforms. Not a single organism can be trusted. A world without life is a world without suffering."

Daisy gasped, eyes flaring wide. Grekka called forth a thick shield of ice almost the entire height and width of his body and forced a powerful magnetic field around it. He grabbed hold of the shield from behind with an open palm and focused even more of his energy into it. The Master Pendant's glow grew erratic and inconsistent, almost as if it was attempting to siphon more of Grekka's energy into the shield than the white-clothed fighter himself actually wanted to.

"Since offense is the only thing you know, I'm giving you this opportunity," Grekka scowled. "You must attack me and penetrate through the Magnetized Ice Shield that I have created. However, if you fail to break through, the magnetic forces of my shield will ravage through your body and rip the very foundation of your form apart. There's nothing else you can do now but attack." He chuckled before he finished what he was saying. "So if I were you, I would use your most powerful technique."

Daisy, depressed and saddened by what had become of the ice wielder, nonetheless remained focused and unwavering in her demeanor. "You want to settle this all now...don't you?"

"You have one shot," said Grekka. "You fail this shot, you forfeit your life."

There was a brief moment of silence over the rooftop through which the very tension of the scene could be sensed without the slightest effort. Daisy sighed, then abducted her left arm as she focused her elemental earth energy into her outstretched fist. "As you wish..."

A great fist of earth materialized around Daisy's hand. She promptly crystallized the entirety of her gathered minerals and soil to make her trusty Crystal Fist, but this particular Crystal Fist was different. Although roughly the same size as all the ones she had created in the past, this particular mass of crystal was substantially more dense and inconceivably hard. It gave off extra sparkles and shine as she crouched down and got ready to leap forward.

"Final Crystal Fist," the Moirai of Earth said under her breath.

"Excellent," Grekka mumbled. "It's good to see that you're meeting your demise without fear."

"Alright, Grekka, if this is what you want," Daisy murmured, tightening her great took yet another deep breath, calm but intense . "...I will do what I must."

Chapter XXXIV

Downfall :

Daisy stood, Final Crystal Fist at ready. Dozens of yards across from her was Grekka, his super-charged Magnetized Ice Shield primed and ready to ravage whoever failed to penetrate and breakthrough its defenses. Daisy had proven her status as an offensive powerhouse, but Grekka was equally formidable in executing devastating counterattacks and critical weak point hits. The Moirai and Elkon all watched to see the result of the possible final clash between the Nova Form fighter and the ice wielder. Daisy's and Grekka's two distinct tendencies left the outcome up in the air.

Despite the situation, Daisy's mind took her back to all the ridicule and hatred she had to endure during her final years in Sarasaland from the many people who believed that her ascension to the throne would mean the death of the kingdom. So many voices and images flooded her thoughts, so many ingrained in her psyche but repressed for so long. *Oh look, it's the Princess of Sarasaland... What a joke she is, I mean, what princess in their right mind looks like they're going out to play baseball 24/7?... She's no ruler... That's the best heir King Sarasa can come up with? The minute she takes over the kingdom, this whole place is going under... I bet that sassy brat thinks she's better than us because she's a princess... Let's hope we have someone in one of our cities who's a skilled assassin... You better be prepared to take care of the kingdom when I'm gone, my daughter...* She grimaced, all those voices sounding far too real, as if she had just heard them an hour ago.

Similarly, the cruel and spiteful voices of Grekka's days back in Kareah began to flow into the ice wielder's thoughts. So many people hated him, seeing him as both a threat to their way of life and as a mistake of nature. *What a Freak. A guy that looks like a girl, please. He's better off wearing a dress. Wait, he's behind me? Ah! I'm sorry! Don't kill me!... You're a bane to our city; remember that, son... Your father and I are constantly under the microscope*

because of you, so I hope you're happy with yourself... One day, you will lose control of your power, and you will seek to gain control over everyone else as counterbalance. Hopefully, you'll die before that happens... You make one wrong move, and you're out of Kareah. The only reason you're still alive is because we don't believe in killing... He could feel the hatred swell up within him, all culminating and mounting, longing to be unleashed.

And then, reality snapped the two fighters back. Wasting no further time, Daisy bolted forward, her left arm pulled back and in position to unleash a devastating hit. Grekka maintained his stance and held up his shield, locking himself into place with as much stiff sturdiness as possible. Once she got close enough to him, Daisy hopped up into the air and brought down her great crystallized fist on top of his shield. A loud boom echoed throughout the rooftop, followed by a faint burst of white light and a gust of very cold wind.

"Unreal!" Warra shouted. "They're both the exact same!"

Daisy had managed to push Grekka back several feet, but his shield was still up and very much active. The two were in deadlock, the repulsion from Grekka's shield causing Daisy to hover in midair as they fiercely tried to impose their will onto the other. Daisy did all she could to force her Final Crystal Fist through, an attack that Grekka had so far held at bay with his Magnetized Ice Shield. The power struggle of magnetic ice and crystal caused streaks of electricity to branch off and flicker around them, further illuminating the rooftop.

"The Nova Form is rivaling the Master Pendant?" Elkon said in surprise. "No, the Nova Form is not supposed to grant the user such a dramatic boost."

As if in response to Elkon's words, the Master Pendant began to shine and gleam once more. The magnetic streaks of energy visible around Grekka's shield intensified in amplitude. Daisy soon found herself being pushed back inch by inch, despite her best efforts. Grekka drove back the Moirai of Earth, slowly gaining an advantage over her. It didn't help her that she was suspended in air with no connection to the ground.

"Grekka's holding his ground," Bowser murmured. "Daisy looks to be

faltering."

"Then this is it," Ramona said, sullen and gloomy. "We failed, and the world is doomed..."

"You all will need to get out of here now and warn Rosalina so you can setup countermeasures," Andrew asserted. "I'll try to do as much as I can to Elkon and Grekka before I fall..."

"No," Bowser quickly refuted. "You two came late, so you may not know yet, but if there's anything you can be sure of, it's that you can never count Daisy out."

"Yeah, you guys can't just doubt her like that!" said Athelstan. "She can win this!"

"I was guilty of doubting her too," said Warra. "But I've since learned."

"She's the dude!" Marut said with a thumbs up. "Just watch!"

Grekka managed to force Daisy back several feet since gaining control of the power struggle. "I would hope you can hold up for as long as you can, for the moment your attack breaks, *you* break."

No! Daisy screamed in her mind. *I've come too far! I've got to do this! For EVERYONE!*

Grekka gasped, suddenly feeling his momentum being reduced to a stop. The two were once again in a standstill, pushing against each other with equal force.

"Neither of them can hold this up for long," Elkon muttered to himself from up in the air.

Grekka continued to enforce his will, a maddening expression dominating his face. The Master Pendant leeched out more of his energy to further fortify his shield and regain the advantage over Daisy. Once more, Daisy was being pushed back. Just when it looked like Grekka was about to pulse out more energy and likely overrun the Moirai of Earth, he suddenly found himself distracted and taken aback from what he was doing. *It's just as everyone in*

Kareah foretold, he realized in his mind. *I'm losing control, and now I'm going to destroy everyone...*

Grekka's concentration began to slip, but that small break in focus was all Daisy needed to be able to charge herself forward in one final push to burst through his shield and land a critical hit on the entirety of the ice wielder's torso. The bone shattering punch made Grekka ricochet off the ground and into the air before coming to a rest back on the rooftop floor several yards away from Daisy. Her teammates all held their applause as Daisy put her feet back on the ground for the first time since forming her Final Crystal Fist, knowing very well that they would've cheered on the downfall of their former teammate.

"That's it..." Daisy said, panting and sweating. Grekka lay face-up on the ground, moaning in pain that transcended physical boundaries. She walked over to the ice wielder, the pendant around his neck still beaming in a slow strobe effect. Grekka winced, assuming that he was about to be killed. Everyone there watched in silence, waiting for whatever the Moirai of Earth was going to do.

Daisy just stared at the ice wielder for a moment, knowing there was no way she could bring herself to do anything more to Grekka than what she just did. *It's those outliers that are able to see and perceive with untainted eyes and unbiased judgment,* she remembered Bowser tell her. *So if what you said is true, then you may be one of those outliers. Whatever you do, don't let the world change that, even if it means you have to walk alone in your path for the rest of your life...*

Grekka grimaced, his hands curling into fists and shaking, his eyes watering. He looked defeated in more ways than one.

"You and I are a lot alike," Daisy said, quiet and gentle, still trying to catch her breath. "More than you know." She paused, taking in Grekka's anguished expression. "How hard it is to be faceless, having only a mask to protect what is exposed."

Both the earth and ice wielders appeared to be exhausted at this point. The pendant around Grekka's neck maintained its shine, though it seemed the tension in his face and body was easing.

"I was faceless," Daisy continued. "As faceless as you are now. You can argue that I still am faceless." She knelt down on one knee to Grekka's right. "I remember how everyone hated me, and how I hated them. I didn't do anything for them to hate me, but they hated anyways. I remember hating how restricted my life was, and how much I hated my parents. I wanted to be something that my parents just never allowed me to be. And it turned out that it was because of my parents – my dad specifically – that everyone hated me. Everything I believed myself to be good at, I was never truly sure of. I didn't know who I was, why I was alive, or if I was better off dead. It's a wonder how I got through those years, but I did. I got through it. And so did you."

"...But why," Grekka croaked. "Why would you protect and fight for a world that has been so vicious to you? Why would you protect and fight for people that have shown you nothing but hatred?"

"Because our world is something worth protecting and fighting for," Daisy replied, regaining strength through her firm words. "And it's something that's worth the effort to fix, no matter how much adversity gets in the way; even if we end up having to fight to fix it for the rest of our lives."

"Not every human is bad, Grekka," Bowser said from back at the staircase. "I'm certain of it, now more than ever."

"I've come across some nasty ones for sure," Andrew added. "But I've also come across a fair amount of good ones as well." He glanced at each of his Moirai teammates.

"The bad ones will get what's coming to them!" Ramona assured. "It's the good ones that make up the world we are fighting for."

"Hey, even the bad ones," said Athelstan. "There's always the chance for redemption and renewal! That's what separates the real bad people from those that are just misguided."

"And the real bad people are the ones that make what we're doing awesome!" Marut cheered.

Elkon remained silent as he hovered high in the air, listening without

distraction to everything that was being said by the Moirai. Grekka turned his head and peered at all of his former teammates before staring up into the crimson-pink sky of the Twelfth Dimension. His voice cracked as he said, "I can't believe you guys are so forgiving. After all I tried to do..."

Daisy stared into Grekka's eyes and began to speak in a solemn and definite tone. "I know it must be hard for you to trust anyone what with everything that's happened in your past, but, I'm not going to demand that you trust us. I'm going to tell you so that you know, that you can always trust us no matter what. That's a promise, and I'm also going to tell you that you don't have to trust us at all or even believe us."

Warra realized at that point that Daisy was repeating what he himself had told her before not too long ago. He couldn't help but smile.

"Just know that you *can* if you choose to," the Moirai of Earth finished.

For a moment, Grekka appeared to regain complete control of himself. Sanity returned to his face...and then the moment ended. The Master Pendant began ludicrously shining, pulling Grekka's body a short distance up into the air.

"What's going on?" Daisy asked, standing back up.

"The Master Pendant...has fused itself to my neck," Grekka managed to grunt out. "...You have to kill me."

"What? No!" Daisy firmly replied as the other Moirai all ran over to stand by her.

"It's going to take control of me again," said Grekka. "This pendant is not without thought. I dont't know how, but it's malevolent. It's been eating away at my mind, it's eroding my soul, and it's about to take full control over me to wreak havoc." His body emitted a ghastly glow. "I won't have any command over my body! Hurry! Just do it!"

"No! There's got to be another way!" Warra asserted.

"Explain this, Elkon!" Andrew yelled.

"No! This is not because of Elkon!" shouted Grekka. "And there is no other way! The energy within this pendant is far more than I have displayed thus far! It's going to use my body as a harbinger of destruction – if you don't kill me, everyone dies!"

"That's just out of the question," said Daisy.

"Please," the ice wielder urged. "I'm trying as much as I can to resist for as long as possible so that you can do what must be done! There is no need for me to be around any longer. I would've loved to help you all cleanse the world of its evils, but I just can't. I don't have any more power left, and this pendant has stripped me of my being." The glow around his body magnified, energy crackling around his limbs. "You all have a will to live; I've lost mine a long time ago. You all fear death; I've never feared it. You all have something keeping you alive; I don't. So what am I doing here?"

No response came from any of the Moirai, none of them quite sure what to say. Anything that they came up with would have led into a circular argument that would have gone on long enough for the Master Pendant to take root and have its way.

"Just do it," Grekka demanded.

Still, the Moirai gave no response.

Grekka's body began to glow with even more intensity. "C'mon!" He could feel his limbs starting to move and bend in haphazard fashion against his will. "Now!"

Daisy appeared to focus her earth energy into her fists, but cut the flow off within seconds. Marut started to ready his ninjato, only to change his mind and replace it in its sheath. Bowser and the others made no such movements. Elkon maintained his position in the air, watching the scene unfold but not doing a thing.

Grekka's eyes flared wide open. "DO IT NOW OR YOU ALL DIE!"

Without warning, Warra leapt up into the air in front of Grekka. Twin daggers in both hands, he jammed his implements through the ice

wielder's chest and breached his heart. The sound of puncture reverberated in all the Moirai's ears.

"...Good..." Grekka grunted.

The Moirai of Water promptly ripped his elemental tools out of Grekka's body. With tears in his eyes as he backflipped away, he let loose a curving column of water from his twin daggers aimed square at the gaping hole in Grekka's chest. The elemental blast struck home, causing the ice wielder's body to violently jolt. At the last second, the Master Pendant detached itself from Grekka's neck and soared off the tower top as he flew backwards through the air and landed with a thud near where Elkon levitated. No one seemed to be aware of the pendant's departure. Warra sheathed his twin daggers upon landing, his eyes closed, his forehead accumulating a nervous sweat, and his breathing shallow. The Moirai all ran over to the downed ice wielder, grim and somber as they gathered around the dying fighter.

"I'm sorry, Grekka," Warra murmured.

"...Don't apologize," Grekka croaked. "You did what you were supposed to do. I've come up short. I don't have the ability to make any sort of impact. That just makes me...unnecessary. Someone else can easily take my place; allow me to defer to them so they can have their chance. I've grown to be cynically misanthropic, not towards everyone but towards society as a whole in general as it continues to grow dirtier, nastier, and ever more corrupted with hatred. Why should my life, why should I, a bitter and broken man who could care less about his life and death, continue on? People fight so hard for something I do not covet and am even starting to reject. In my death, space is cleared for the people who want to live. I am nothing more than an anachronism now – only alive for a childlike innocence and purity that has eroded from existence in our impure, malevolent world...and now, not even that."

"You were never unnecessary, Grekka," said Daisy. "We were all called to purify the elements and their shrines."

"And that task has been completed," the ice wielder replied. "What happens to me is unimportant. Ever since I was young, I waited on

the heroes that would come to free me from my torment. As time went on and my perception of society was formed, I waited on those same heroes to not only set me free, but to revolutionize the world and cleanse it of all the impurities it harbored."

"No matter how hard, it can be done," Daisy assured, gentle in her tone. "I'm certain."

"Your unfaltering will is a blessing, whether you're aware of it or not, Daisy," Grekka murmured. "You're not just the Moirai of Earth; you're the Hero of Earth." His voice was now profoundly weak. "I acknowledge you all...as heroes. I see now that you're those heroes that I waited for, who can take on such a weighted responsibility. The shrines have been liberated...now I ask that you liberate the world, because the shrines were not the only places that were full of corruption."

"We'll do everything that we can," Warra solemnly replied.

"We will," Andrew said in certainty.

"You were a good bro," Marut remarked in salute.

"The short time I spent on the mission with you all, was easily the highlight of my time alive," Grekka rasped. "Thank you...my teammates...my friends...for freeing me..." Within seconds, all tension faded from Grekka's body, and the ice wielder's life force came to a complete and absolute rest.

The Moirai all stood in quiet, offering a brief moment of silence for their fallen friend. Elkon floated back down to the ground opposite but relatively close to the elemental wielders, his gaze locked on the now uninhabited body of Grekka. He too spared a few moments of silence. For a while, all that could be heard was the soft breeze drifting through the cold and crisp air.

"...It was just like this..." Elkon quietly began. "...When my family and friends were forced to be executed with my own hands...by order of King Sarasa."

Daisy's eyes shot wide open, the shock value of Elkon's statement

almost overwhelming. The expressions her teammates gave hinted their surprise as well.

"I hope you've had a taste now," Elkon said under his breath. "Of what I had to experience; of what I had to endure. I have comprehension beyond your understanding because of what I had witnessed *and* played a part in. Maybe now you'll understand why my way is the right way, and why your way is wrong."

Daisy angled her head up, her golden eyes now staring down Elkon with ferocity. She raised her left arm up and grimaced at the dark being. "In honor of Grekka...I will take you down!"

Elkon shook his head. "You humans are really something else. Too smart for your own good, and yet so obstinate. I'll give you one final chance to rescind your efforts against me; one final chance to cling onto what little time you have left before I set into motion a new plan to succeed where my current one has failed. But if you truly wish to stand in my way to the bitter end, if you still believe that your way is more noble than mine, then you will come to the top of my Final Fortress, and confront me there in the Arena of Absolution."

"Final Fortress?" Ramona asked.

"This tower was simply an outpost, a sanctuary for me to meditate in peace," said Elkon. "My true base is that which lies ahead three miles to the northeast of here, the direction in which I shall fly in since the stronghold is relatively close by." He stopped talking for a few moments as he floated up into the air, the eyes of all the Moirai glued to him. Daisy's eyes were especially intense, and not just because of her Nova state.

"Follow me if you dare," murmured Elkon, taking off through the sky in the direction of his fortress. Except for Bowser, the Moirai all ran over to the end of the rooftop to catch a glimpse of Elkon disappearing into the distance towards a very faint building that was barely even visible.

Bowser looked down at Grekka once more, deep in thought. *Grekka, you held your grudge against humanity your entire life, and it killed you. Not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually as*

well... Is it really worth your own life to hold a grudge? Was the grudge even necessary? Is my grudge against the Toadstool family even necessary? I can't ever forgive them for what they've done, but why have I been plotting revenge against them? What would that accomplish? That's just more death and destruction that will come about. I wish I had realized earlier, but, the longer I drag out a mission built on vengeance, the more I endanger my own people. Nobody wins in that situation, regardless of which side they were on. If Elkon doesn't realize that soon, then he'll meet the same fate as Grekka... He peered at each of his teammates.

"Andrew and I are sorry for doubting you, Daisy," said Ramona.

"We didn't think you were going to pull that one out," said Andrew.

"It's alright," Daisy replied. "It's quite alright. Don't sweat it."

"We won't sweat it now, that's for sure," said the Moirai of Shadow.

Bowser cracked a smile. *I'm tired of fighting for revenge* , he affirmed in thought. *This is what I'm supposed to be using my powers for – for the betterment of the common good, human or not. I'm sorry, Mario, Peach, Green 'Stache – er, Luigi – for taking so long to figure myself out.*

Daisy reverted from her Nova Form back to her normal state as the group of elemental wielders all turned around and walked back to Bowser and Grekka. They could not sense the energy signature of the ice wielder's remorseful raging spirit at all.

"So what happens to him?" asked Ramona, referring to Grekka.

"Do we take him with us?" Warra wondered.

"No," Daisy responded. "He can stay here. He'll be at rest here. Nobody will disturb him." She paused, looking up into the sky. "This is a lifeless realm."

"I will take on the ownership of your tools," said Andrew, picking up the former Moirai of Ice's twin forearm machetes and their sheaths. "A tribute to you so that you are not forgotten." He paused, beginning to muse on Grekka's fall. *You're not the only one who*

rejects life. I wish it was me in your position. It would have been better. He glanced at each of his teammates. *I don't care how confident I am in my abilities; it doesn't change the fact that I've wondered from the start if I was ever worthy of having life. I've been questioning whether I was ever even cut out for this mission, or if I even belonged with this team in the first place.* He sighed, as if trying to coax himself into a certain mindset. He tried to smile a little, though the expression seemed hollow. *But, nobody else needs to know that. And still, I don't know how long I'm going to hold up. I could just slip one day, sooner rather than later, and they probably wouldn't even notice...just slip into the shadows and fall silent...*

"What about those beings down on the lower floors?" Marut asked. "The Dino Piranha? The Rollodillo? Whomp King?"

"They can stay there for now," replied Warra. "They won't cause any trouble to anyone. I doubt they can even go up the stairs without breaking them. They probably only managed to get into the tower because of Elkon's portals."

"I agree," said Daisy. "We'll let Rosalina decide what exactly should be done here. For now, I think we all know where we need to go. Right?"

"Right," all of the other Moirai affirmed in unison.

Daisy nodded. "Alright. So let's make a move for Elkon's Final Fortress."

"The pendant!" Marut suddenly cried out. "It's gone!"

"What?!" Daisy hollered. All the Moirai keyed in on Grekka's neck, recognizing the absence of the Master Pendant.

"Where'd it go?" Bowser asked, his head darting around. He could not spot the gem anywhere on the rooftop, and neither could the others.

"I say, good riddance," said Athelstan. "That thing was more trouble than it was worth. I don't know what Elkon ever wanted with that thing in the first place if it was capable of doing all that it did."

"Well, he said it himself," stated Warra. "He didn't expect such effects to happen as a result of the pendant's usage. So that means that there's something about it that eludes even him."

"Wherever it is, it can stay right there," said Daisy. "It's not like it's going to follow us."

Chapter XXXV

Journey's End :

Carefully descending down the stairs and floors past the unconscious beasts and the still struggling to get up Whomp King, the Moirai exited Elkon's Tower to see an astral clone of Rosalina waiting for them a few dozen yards away. Weary and tired, the elemental wielders gathered in front of the Elder of the Cosmos and told her everything that went on inside the tower. Rosalina listened intently as they relayed all that had occurred with Grekka, Elkon, and the Master Pendant.

"...I see," Rosalina mumbled. "If the Master Pendant is lost, then let it stay lost so that it is never found again."

"What's the story behind that pendant?" Bowser asked.

"A very bad story," Rosalina gravely answered. "I would disregard it completely. It is in your best interests to forget about that pendant. No questions asked. There may come a time in the future when you will need to uncover other Pendants of Power, but please, for the sake of everyone and everything, leave that particular one alone – leave the Master Pendant alone. I was hoping it would never be found, to be dreadfully honest. It was Elkon's ignorance of the true purpose of the Master Pendant that let him take possession of it, not knowing the nature of its powers and design."

"You don't have to tell that to us twice after we saw what it did to Grekka," Marut remarked.

"I believe it will not be meddled with as long as it remains here in this realm," said Rosalina. "So, you must now go to this, Final Fortress?"

"Yes," said Warra. He pointed off into the distance where the outline of the stronghold was just barely visible.

"The exact reasoning behind Elkon's actions is still unknown,"

murmured Daisy. "I know he said he wants to do the world a favor, but, there has to be a better way to do so than killing off everyone. I don't think he's said everything either, especially regarding what he brought up towards the end about my father."

"Hopefully you'll be able to get some answers from Elkon," said Rosalina. "I will gather some of my associates here to clean up the tower after everything has settled down. "I doubt there will be anything of note within, but this dimension really should be left alone. I'm almost convinced this is where Elkon spent the majority of his time after his recorded death, which may be why he was otherwise missing and able to evade any future archive of him. Don't quote me on that, because there's very little – if any – certainty in any of this. All anyone has been able to do up to this point is speculate. Regardless of the case, you must defeat him."

"We vowed to win," Daisy affirmed, solemn as ever. "We will win."

"Throughout this journey, you have all improved yourselves as fighters, and as people," said Rosalina. "You now know what it means to be a hero, all of you. I am proud to recognize you all as the heroes of destiny. I am therefore proud to also bestow onto you all the title of 'Kruna.' "

"Kruna?" Marut asked, confused.

"Ancient Cosmic Dialect for 'Elemental Hero' and 'Guardian of the Elements'," Rosalina answered. "And you've fulfilled the criteria not by the abilities that you all possess, but by using those abilities in the protection of the elements and of your world."

"It is much appreciated, Grand Elder," said Warra, bowing his head.

Ramona nodded with a light smile. "Appreciated by all of us."

"I will await your return home," Rosalina said before disbanding her astral clone.

Bowser turned to Daisy. "Well, I think I speak for us all when I say that we're under your direction."

"None of us have any objections," said Athelstan.

"You're the leader," Warra said to Daisy. "Lead us to victory; you lead us today."

"However raspy and grating your voice is on the ears," added Bowser with a grin. "Sorry; you know I gotta backhand ya."

Daisy smiled wholeheartedly at her team, touched by the confidence and trust that they all had in her. She turned and shifted her gaze to the faint structure off in the distance where Elkon awaited.

"What a great way to spend an amazing autumn day," said Peach.

"It's been a great and peaceful vacation," said Luigi. "Let's try and stretch it out as long as we can."

Mario swung his driver to tee off at the fourteenth hole of Mushroom Kingdom's Sparkling Waters Course, making contact with the golf ball and sending it on its way down the middle of the fairway. Much to Mario's dismay, his golf ball ended up in a bunker that *also* existed in the middle of the fairway.

"Man, you suck," said Toad.

"You gotta be kidding me!" Mario griped. "Who puts a bunker in the middle of the fairway?"

"Well, that bunker's there for a reason," said Luigi. "It's there for people like you to land their shots into."

"Because you suck," added Toad.

"C'mon, man!" exclaimed Mario. "I'm only three shots back from you two!"

"Yeah, because you suck," Toad repeated.

"And what makes you so confident that you're gonna run away with the win?" asked Mario.

"Because I'm a master!" Toad proclaimed. "A master of skills!... And

you suck."

"A master of skills," muttered Mario. "You mean like that time when you fell out of your kart cause you wanted to try and loop around that giant pipe?"

"Too many bad memories!" Toad shouted. "It must stay dead! It must stay buried!"

"Hey, Mario," said Luigi. "What about that time in the Smash Melee tournament against Donkey Kong and Pikachu when DK had two stock and you and Pikachu both had one stock and DK picked *you* up to carry you off the stage as a sacrifice?"

"Everyone knows that was cheap!" Mario yelled. "I could have won if he didn't do that!"

"He says it after the fact," Toad remarked, pulling out his driver. "Stand aside so I can use my master skills to tee off."

"Have you guys seen Daisy recently?" Peach asked. "She's been gone for the past several days. It's probably been over a week since I've last seen her."

"That girl is in and out of the Mushroom Kingdom all the time," Luigi said, shaking his head. "She never mentions anything about where she goes."

"She's probably been at the gym," said Mario. "You know how strong she is. To be quite frank, I wish I was as strong as she was, even though that does sound kinda funny to say. Maybe I should spend some more time in the gym myself."

"Yeah, burn off some of that soft stuff on ya," Toad added.

"She could just be out in the Flower Fields to the south of here," said Luigi. "Or maybe she's getting prepared for the upcoming strikers tournament. I don't know; does anybody ever know where she is?"

"I wonder if she's mad that we never let her come along on any of our adventures," Mario pondered aloud.

"I wouldn't doubt it," said Luigi. "But then again, maybe our adventures aren't her kind of atmosphere."

"Are you trying to say she can't handle them?" Toad asked with a snicker. "She's stronger and faster than both of you two, so you must be insinuating that she's dumb."

"What? No!" Luigi quickly snapped. "I'm just saying; none of us know that much about her at all, and she hasn't been very open about it either. But then again, when we do see her, we're not particularly in the right kind of setting to be asking that stuff. She's her own woman, independent and doing...whatever it is she does."

"Well, I hope she's enjoying herself," said Peach.

"It's too bad she doesn't get to see me wipe the floor with you all!" Toad hollered, driving his golfball out onto the right side of the fairway. His ball stayed clear of the bunker Mario landed in.

"Yeah, yeah, yuck it up," Mario mumbled. "This game's far from over!"

"Look here, bro; you gotta put more hip into it!" said Luigi. He wound up his swing and struck the golf ball off the tee in a fluid and seamless motion, sending the tiny sphere on a farther trajectory than his brother. Unfortunately for him, the golf ball sailed through the air and took a very hard bounce down the fast fairway into a patch of rough before just managing to roll into the nearby pond.

"Wow!" Mario shouted in surprise. "Look at all that hip!"

A klaptrap rose up from the pond and crawled up into the rough. It opened its mouth, revealing that Luigi's golf ball rested on its tongue.

"When life gets you down..." Toad began. "Drive your golf balls into klaptraps!"

"Great, now I need a drop," said Luigi.

"Oh no!" Mario rebutted. "The ball's not in the water – You gotta play that!"

"What?!" Luigi blurted out.

"Well, it's not in the water, so you gotta play it where it lies," Toad said, arms crossed and eyebrows cocked.

"Play through," said Mario.

"Oh c'mon, you guys!" Luigi pleaded.

"Play through, bro."

Luigi grumbled as he snatched his golf bag and started his trot down to the pond, the Klaptrap devilishly grinning and giggling all the while.

The now Kruna stood at the entryway to a grand, expansive fortress. The construct appeared medieval, intricate, and gothic all at once, complete with a stony exterior of gunmetal gray and navy blue hues subtly tinted by the red and brown surroundings of the Twelfth Dimension. Its thirteen story build seemed overwhelming, but their task at hand was too important to run away from. None of them had any intention of fleeing when they had begun the mission, and this stronghold was not going to change that. They had come so far, and now the end of their journey was here, at the base of Elkon's Final Fortress.

"This is *really* it then," Bowser thought aloud. "You know what, I'll be mad if this really isn't it again."

"I think there's a reason Elkon called this the 'Final Fortress,' " Athelstan remarked.

"It all comes down to this," Andrew murmured.

"We've all been able to recover a modest amount of energy on our way here from the tower, I'm sure," said Warra. "Let's try to limit our elemental usage unless absolutely necessary so that we can have it ready for when we reach the Arena of Absolution."

Suddenly, the gates that sealed off the entryway swung open. The

Kruna looked around for the cause, but found nothing. Other than each other. Daisy was the only one close enough to the doors to have opened them.

"Did you do that?" Bowser asked Daisy.

"No, I didn't do a thing," replied the Kruna of Earth. "He must know that we're here."

A moment passed in which nothing was said among the group before Daisy walked in. The rest of the Kruna followed.

The highly cybernetic interior of the Final Fortress was fortified with technology and mechanical attributes that seemed far more advanced and sophisticated than anything the Kruna had collectively seen before. Dark metal constructs outlined by neon lighting and hard, shiny floors dominated a majority of the structure within, contrasting heavily with the stronghold's exterior. It appeared as if much of the design of the inside was based upon the various aesthetics of the eight elemental shrines. Some of the areas looked as if they could have qualified as carbon copies of various portions of the shrines had it not been for the futuristic scheme of the stronghold.

"Alright," Daisy said, her volume ascending. "Time to make some noise!"

The Kruna maneuvered their way through the most intricate set of puzzles they had encountered on their quest, scraped past security systems, and plowed through guards that could only be described as being embodiments of energy that were incapable of independent thought. They overcame treacherous chambers and hallways consisting of all eight of the elements before entering a vast, spacious room on the fourth floor. There was one narrow passageway through which to travel that was bordered with guard rails and ellipsed into a circular shape in the middle of the room before narrowing back into a linear path all the way to the doors at the other end. On either side of the passageway was a chasm that dropped off into a bright, white light that contrasted with the otherwise dark lighting of the room. Up above around the walls and the ceilings were turbines, engines, computers, and assorted

machinery.

"This must be a reactor room for the fortress," said Ramona.

"It would definitely make a good checkpoint in this massive stronghold," Bowser muttered. "Something tells me that this is the only way to advance further up in this building."

The Kruna progressed through the reactor room and the doors at the other end of the walkway to enter the second part of the fortress. Growing more fatigued with each passing moment, they continued on their way. If nothing else, they would continue *on belief alone* if it had to come to that. Fortunately for them, they had just enough reserves of energy for it to not be an issue. Still, the physical and psychological toll that the journey had produced was not lost on any of the elemental wielders. But if there was anything to take away from their journey that at the moment was more apparent than anything else, it was to keep moving and to keep fighting through until all was said and done. They cut through the middle floors of the fortress and the next batch of obstacles that awaited them until they reached a room on the tenth floor nearly identical to the grand room on the fourth floor.

"Another reactor room," Andrew said as the group trekked to the other end of the walkway.

"We've spent quite a bit of time trying to get through here," said Warra. "Unreal. The kind of tech that it took to make this complex...and for only him?"

"Well, the mooks here have feelings too," commented Marut. "I mean, the security. But you're right; this is messed up."

"Regardless of how messed up it is, we just got to keep going," Daisy murmured, her eyes glistening. "Just gotta move along. We'll make it through, no matter what."

Entering the doors in front of them, the Kruna ascended a flight of stairs to make it to the eleventh floor. The build of this upper level was much more open and spread compared to the condensed and busy feel of the first two groups of floors.

"He told us we would have to get to the top of this building," said Athelstan. "That may very well mean that we have to get onto the roof."

"I think so," Bowser said. "When I looked at this fortress from the outside, the top of it looked pretty ornate, and I'm not even referring to the eight projections along the outside of the top of this place. That can only mean something of interest lies up there."

Enduring the toughest of hazards and puzzles, the elemental wielders moved up a floor just to find that they had to shuffle back and forth between the twelfth and thirteenth floors to make any progress. They even had to go around parts of the fortress exterior and through the towers that projected from the top-third of the building in order to activate and gain access to a large platform technically part of the thirteenth level and overlooking the main room of the twelfth level. It was on this platform that an entryway existed in the wall that the platform was attached to, leading into a short tunnel that opened up into a room with a winding set of ascending stairs.

"That's pretty annoying," Bowser mumbled. "As technologically advanced as this place is – however strange that may be – and there's still stairs all over the place?"

"Elkon must've ran out of batteries," said Andrew.

Up the stairs the Kruna went, coming to a very wide set of doors at the top of the staircase. They opened the doors to encounter a grand and surreal setting on the outside; the top of Elkon's Final Fortress. A regal and ornamental walkway seventy yards in width extended a hundred yards in front of them, bordered by shoulder-high chain link gates and cobblestone posts. A short flight of twenty stairs stretched across the entirety of the walkway at the other end of the expansive path that led to the very center of the fortress. The eight towers built along the exterior of the stronghold reached high into the sky. A few of the pathways that they traversed through along the exterior of the complex were visible even though they were at a lower height. The majority of the remaining build of the top of the fortress consisted of walkways and bridges that didn't appear to be anything more than complex, polygonal loops around the center

feature at the top of the short and wide staircase directly ahead.

A rectangular arena, two hundred yards in length and one hundred yards in width, stood at the top of the small climb of stairs. Except for air since it exists anywhere that isn't a vacuum, each of the matter-based elements – water, stone, ice, and earth – were present in equal quantities in the corners of the arena. Fire, light, and shadow, being energy-based elements, did not need to be allocated any special space on the battlefield. Floating just above the stairs and arena was Elkon, his arms crossed and his head uncovered from his hood. The Kruna marched up with haste to confront the dark being, who didn't seem to be surprised by their arrival in the least.

"So what's so special about this place that you felt the need to drag us up here?" asked Andrew.

"Your trek here was nothing but a final test," came the response from Elkon. "You passed, so we now have the proper setting for this conflict...the proper setting for finality." He gestured all across the rooftop and towards the Arena of Absolution. "The stage has been set, so shall we proceed?"

"So, Daisy," Bowser began. "You still want to take your shot at Elkon?"

"Of course," answered Daisy, her steely resolve on full display. "I've been waiting for this for a long time now. But I have to admit, I don't have enough energy to stand against him. This journey has left me so depleted."

"Then let's all pull together and donate our energy to Daisy!" Marut suggested, striking his fist out. "How 'bout it?"

"Yeah," Warra replied, smiling and joining his fist to Marut's.

"Definitely," said Andrew, adding his fist. The rest of the Kruna followed suit, coming together in a circle to line up their clenched hands. A gap was left open, ready for their earthen teammate.

"C'mon, Daisy!" Athelstan happily urged.

Daisy cracked a faint smile, overcome with joy from the willingness of her teammates to give their energy to her. There was absolutely no doubt now that they had all their trust in her, and therefore she knew that she could not let them down. "Thanks, you guys," she graciously murmured. She stepped into the circle and spread an open hand over the arranged fists of the other Kruna. "This truly means a lot, more than you may know."

Bowser, Athelstan, Marut, Warra, Ramona, and Andrew all focused the remainder of their energies into their combined fists and allowed the power to flow into Daisy's open hand. She could feel herself being reinvigorated by the combined energies of her friends. Once the transference was complete, they all lowered their arms. Daisy turned around, transforming once more into her Nova Form as she stared down Elkon.

"You know, I've been going to school in hopes of becoming a writer," said Ramona. "This journey of ours has given me some great ideas for the first novel that I want to write. Give us all a good ending, Daisy."

"Yeah, I need a great entry for the Kallantown Archives!" Athelstan exclaimed.

"Whip him good!" Marut cheered.

"We have full belief in you," Andrew assured the Kruna of Earth.

"Your old master would be proud," said Warra.

"We're all proud," Bowser added. "Now win this one for the world!"

Elkon floated backwards to the far end of the Arena of Absolution and placed his feet on the ground. "Step into the arena," he echoed.

Daisy proceeded to move towards the arena and began walking up the stairs, her demeanor as confident and unshakable as ever. At that moment, she realized the fate of the Kruna's world and everyone in it now rested on her shoulders. Everything they had been through led up to this singular, all-important battle. *Failure is not an option,* she asserted in her mind. *I have to succeed, even if it*

means that I must die in order to prevail.

"So, Nova warrior," Elkon boomed, pulling his hood up over his head as Daisy entered the battlefield. "The time has come for this conflict to finally be settled. Are you *ready now* ?"

"Yes, I am," Daisy solemnly replied without hesitation. She came to a stop halfway to the center of the arena. The moment she ceased walking, the Arena of Absolution jolted and jerked out of the ground. The arena then began to slowly and simultaneously rise and rotate so that it was perpendicular to where the rest of the Kruna stood, who all watched in amazement. Daisy kept her gaze focused on her opponent in front of her, paying no mind to the movement of their battlefield. The arena kept rising past even the tips of the eight towers along the outsides of the walls.

"Come back alive, Daisy," Warra murmured, peering up at the ascending arena.

Unknown to the Kruna, the Master Pendant was making its way towards Elkon's Final Fortress. The gem was last seen knocked off of Grekka, and consequently off the ledge of Elkon's Tower. However, the gem was not destroyed – not even damaged in the least. It was able to *float* to the ground, and had decided to lie there in secrecy. No one was ever aware of its location.

The gem now hovered through the air in the direction of the fortress where it had sensed Elkon and the Kruna head to, eager to make its next move.

Chapter XXXVI

The World to Win :

"You know," Elkon began as the arena continued to inch higher into the reddish-pink sky. "Because we are three-dimensional beings, we cannot perceive or experience the events and occurrences of anything beyond the plane of the third dimension. There is so much that could be happening in this realm of the Twelfth Dimension we're in that we're not even aware of. That's the beauty of everything that has been created in every aspect and facet of our reality. The beauty of our reality is something that I wish to fight for, something I wish to protect the integrity of so that mankind can not bring upon it the corruption that it has brought upon itself. In my eyes, I am the hero, and you are the villain."

Daisy's hands held her elbows as she spoke. "If your idea of heroism is wiping out all of humanity, no matter how many other living and non-living things end up being destroyed in the process, I beg to differ."

The arena slowed to a stop. The mist that had gathered underneath their battlefield made it so that only the tops of the eight towers were at least somewhat visible. Daisy's eyes darted to the sides of the field before she locked her gaze back on Elkon. *Well, it's not too high up here,* she thought. *Not like the Air Shrine, at least.*

"Humanity is the root of war, crime, and suffering; all fueled by greed, lust, gluttony, and hatred," Elkon bellowed. "Pay back your debt," he started to say as he focused his energy all throughout his arms, raising them laterally outwards. "...to your war-torn world."

"Those with true debts will be forced to pay, I assure you that," Daisy replied. "I'm not one of them."

"I will be the judge of that," Elkon echoed in an ultra-deep voice. He leapt up into the air above the arena, power now crackling around his arms from his hands to his shoulders. He brought both arms forward to fire off a pink beam of highly concentrated energy at

Daisy, very similar to the one he hit her with at the Earth Shrine but much more powerful. Thanks to her Nova Form, Daisy was able to bat away the attack without much issue just by using her arm.

"That was a gimme," said Elkon. He charged up the same attack again the exact same way that he did it the first time, except halfway through, he teleported out of sight. The dark being reappeared behind Daisy, looking to fire it off at point-blank range and likely end the battle right away. Fortunately, Daisy sensed Elkon appear behind her and swiftly cut to the side to evade the blast. Out of her dodge, she twisted around and jumped at Elkon to land a heavy punch at his chest and a Flurry Punch with her opposite arm.

The dozens of rapid-fire jabs all connected with her opponent in a matter of seconds but was suddenly cut off when Daisy got pushed back towards the center of the arena. She stayed on her feet, stunned and shocked by the fact that she didn't see anything hit her. Just seconds later, she got hit once more, momentarily knocked off her feet by what was apparently nothing. She snapped back up, perplexed since she saw Elkon's arm outstretched and facing her without any visible attack being made.

"Confused?" Elkon asked. "Those light and shadow wielders down below didn't like this technique either, and they probably wouldn't like this next one."

Almost instantly, Daisy was bolted backwards as if she were hit by a cannonball. A short distance through the air she flew before somersaulting into a landing, taking note of Elkon's outstretched arm. His hand looked very similar to Warra's hand when the water wielder fires off water bullets. She would have labeled Elkon's most recent attack as a repeat of his previous attack, except for the fact that this latest one felt much more like it was trying to pierce *through* her.

"How are you doing that?" Daisy asked in bewilderment.

"Well, it would seem unfair to not tell you," Elkon replied. "But what I have been doing is manipulating the space around us, much in the same way you and your friends down below manipulate the elements."

"Oh, that's right," Daisy said under her breath. "The reincarnation of the creator of space..."

"I'll even give you a hint," aid Elkon. "Every time I distort space, the very fabric of the space-time continuum is morphed. Such occurrences are almost unable to be seen by the naked eye unless you're attentively aware, in which case you'll be able to see your very reality warping."

Daisy smirked and withheld comment while getting in position to make an offensive move. Although bothered at first by the surprise, she did not appear as concerned about Elkon's techniques as Ramona and Andrew did in their conflict against him.

"And again!" Elkon yelled, sending another billowing spatial burst towards the Kruna of Earth. Daisy quickly caught sight of the distortion sent her way and darted to the side with a swift leap.

The sounds Daisy heard as the ripples moved through space were equivalent to a collection of faint metallic vibrations, making her wonder if she would even be able to counter such an attack if it came down to it. *It looks like even if I did have decent defensive tactics, they would do no good here,* she determined in her mind. Another rumbling wave came hurtling through the space between her and Elkon, though she managed to evade once more to the side. *I can't believe how quickly these attacks are coming,* she thought. Yet another wave came, another of the same kind by Elkon that Daisy just barely dodged as it pulsated towards her with the same blistering speed of the previous attacks.

You know what; to hell with it! Daisy yelled in her mind as she saw Elkon getting ready to let loose another Spatial Projection. She swiftly pulled up a large and dense mound of earth from its corner of the arena and erected a wall of dirt and soil just in front of her with the intention of blocking the spatial attack, only to have the rippling space burst through her barrier without any issue whatsoever *and* slam her back and off her feet.

"You don't want to fall behind too early now, Daisy," said Elkon. "It should have been obvious that that wasn't going to work. Now Please, are you going to take this seriously or not?"

The Kruna of Earth bolted back to her feet, smiling but giving no answer, physical or verbal, to the space distorter. Elkon suddenly changed his method of offense and leapt up into the air over the center of the arena, instead opting to fire off quartets of pink orbs from his glowing hands that exploded within just a few seconds after being conjured. Daisy ran around the arena to avoid the attacks ,only to have Elkon blast several of them all over the arena and make evasion difficult. She managed to dodge all of them except for the last one Elkon sent out that clipped her in her arm, though she was not bothered too much by it. She was more upset with her inability to move out of the way in time than the searing feeling that momentarily overcame her arm.

Elkon wasted no time and crossed his hands to launch a powerful and wide, brown Hyperbeam at the black-clothed fighter. Daisy whipped herself up into the air to avoid the great blast of energy that sounded like a haunted train running on a rusted track, then commanded the earth elementals that had been scattered about to close in and pummel Elkon while she was airborne. Her maneuver was enough to cut off the Hyperbeam so that she could make a safe landing back down on the ground, also managing to enclose and essentially bury her opponent. With a wave of her arm, she projected the mass of earth up into the air and then reversed its motion to send it – and Elkon – crashing into the arena floor. With a loud thud and a sudden stop in action, Daisy wondered for a moment if she had just won the battle.

No, too easy, the Kruna of Earth thought, intensely staring down her elemental mass. *He's baiting me. He wants to see if I'm going to make another mistake, but he's not going to get another one of those...*

The silence grew broodingly eerie under the crimson and lavender tones of the sky. The mass of earth still stood where Daisy had directed it to go, not a single sound coming from it. Several moments more passed, and still, nothing. The earth wielder could feel her hormones spiking in anticipation of Elkon busting free, all but certain that at any point in time, he would. Her alertness paid off several moments later when the earthen mass that had encased Elkon miraculously flew apart in all directions. Daisy kicked through

the chunk of earth blown her way to avoid getting smacked by the ballistic mass. Elkon stood, mildly hurt, but nothing more.

"So what was with the stalling?" Daisy asked. "Was that your sad attempt at trying to catch me off guard?"

Elkon said nothing for a while, instead deciding to smile. It was the first time anyone had seen the dark being show any sort of expression other than fierce blankness or irritation. Daisy unconsciously and innocently smiled back.

Elkon sent out another wave that rippled through space towards the Kruna of Earth, and Daisy, knowing that there was no possible way to block or counter such an attack, leapt to her right in time to evade. Dashing forward at Elkon upon landing, Daisy pulled back a fist to get ready to slam a brutally heavy punch into his jaw. But the moment she got close enough to land it, the space distorter forced out another Spatial Projection at her.

A simultaneous connection resulted, both fighters landing their attacks on each other. Daisy laid into Elkon's face, and Elkon pushed back Daisy with a hefty amount of blunt force. The earth wielder dug her feet into the ground after the initial shock from his technique to slow her momentum to a halt. With the use of a modest amount of the earth near her, Daisy dashed forward and leapt at her adversary with the component elementals of her high-speed Crystal Kick materializing around her outstretched leg to land another blow while she had the chance. Her attack struck home, knocking him up into the air and technically out of the arena for a short period of time before he began to fall. Daisy came to a rest near the edge of the battlefield, watching Elkon drift past the arena's boundaries. It appeared as if he was going to fall all the way back down out of the sky and to the fortress as he dropped below the arena and consequently out of Daisy's vision. Before he dropped too far down however, his body jolted to a stop in midair.

Daisy waited, unsure whether she had actually succeeded this time or if Elkon was baiting her again. She would not let her guard down, almost certain he was going to fly back up at any moment. Yet somehow, maybe due to the strange silence that pervaded the battlefield, the idea of victory found its way into her head. She

started to wonder if she would be disappointed if it did turn out that she did indeed win on that last hit of hers. Before she could ponder any further the unlikely possibility that she had taken the victory, Elkon shot back up and floated onto the arena, his arms crossed over his chest and a slight expression of amusement on his face.

"Sorry," said Elkon, his tone smug. "But did you think that would have been sufficient enough to defeat me?"

Daisy giggled with a facetious smirk, watching her opponent place his feet on the ground not too far away from her. "It would have been nice. But I also think an abrupt end like that would've been pretty boring."

Now Elkon surprisingly began to chuckle, a gesture once thought impossible to come from him.

"That's twice now that you've faked defeat," Daisy remarked. "What's up?"

"I thought it would be appropriate to play a little joke since you aren't taking me seriously," said Elkon.

"I had no impression that you were one to joke," said Daisy. "I assure you that I'm being as serious as can be, but there's nothing wrong with enjoying a good fight!"

"I suppose not, but still," Elkon muttered, looking off to the side and maintaining his faint grin. "The outcome of the world rests upon the result of our conflict here, and the smiling and childish laughing that you're doing like this is some sort of leisure activity is entirely out of place. Please tell me you weren't like this in your battles against my guardians."

"I wasn't," the Kruna of Earth said. "I guess it's because your guardians were all terribly malevolent and sadistic while you yourself don't necessarily give off that vibe. I don't feel too pressured right now, oddly enough."

"Well, I wasn't expecting that response," stated the space distorter.

How funny, Daisy thought. *I had got so caught up in our mission and*

everything that happened that I forgot how much fun it is to go up against a tough combatant.

To think that someone is actually finding amusement in fighting me, Elkon said in his mind, still smiling. *That figures; why should I expect anything other from a human?*

Daisy marched closer to Elkon, closing the gap between them to less than a mere yard before coming to a stop. In the face of the most powerful adversary she had ever encountered, she kept a mixture of pleasant charm and fierce valor as she dropped her guard.

Or perhaps, there's much more to this particular human than I thought, Elkon mused. After a few moments, he said in deference, "Your move."

"Thanks," Daisy murmured. In seconds, the Kruna of Earth delivered a knee to Elkon's chest, a spin kick to his back, a two-handed smash to the same area, and a high kick into his chest all in a single smooth and seamless motion that left little time for any retaliation. The combo launched him airborne once more, but this time he projected his energy outwards and bent the space to catch himself and erase his momentum after just two seconds of airtime.

"Not bad..." Elkon gasped, smiling despite his audible breathing. "I think that was a good warm-up, wouldn't you say?"

"So, who's not taking who seriously now? " Daisy asked, her smile turning to a smirk.

"You," answered Elkon, realigning his energies before disappearing. He reappeared left of where he was and was gone again in less than a second, only to appear again and vanish several more times in succession in various areas.

Trying to throw me off with teleporting, are you? Daisy thought. "Not going to work!"

Elkon popped up towards the center of the arena and created several dimensional rifts around Daisy. An odd move, until the Kruna

of Earth noticed the rifts were rumbling and shaking. She dove forward on instinct, narrowly avoiding the various spikes and tendrils that ripped through the rifts and all stabbed in the exact area at which her torso previously was. Daisy turned around in time to see the spikes receding back into the fading rifts, but had to move again once she noticed eight more appearing overhead. A swift lateral roll towards the middle of the battlefield kept her from being skewered by the second set of spikes that were made of some unidentifiable spatial matter.

When she peered up to glance at Elkon, he teleported again. Before she even had a chance to look around, he appeared behind her to attack with a smashing kick. It was Daisy's quick reflexes that allowed her to guard against his foot with a two-arm block and counter with the always devastating Smash Punch, amped up in strength courtesy of her Nova Form state. The off-guard space distorter went flying through the air after Daisy's attack made contact. She didn't show any disappointment when she saw him teleport as he was soaring off into the distance.

A couple seconds later, he reappeared as expected high over the center of the arena. He charged up another energy beam identical to the ones he used at the beginning of the battle, then made a very cryptic decision to create a dimensional portal to his side and fire his attack off into the opening. The portal closed once Elkon sent his attack through it. Eight separate portals appeared towards the corners and edges of the arena, one of which shot out Elkon's beam. Daisy twisted out of the way of the energized projectile, the portal it came from vanishing. The beam bolted into another portal and came out of a different one, prompting Daisy to dodge again. She evaded the beam as it continued to enter and exit the dimensional openings until all but one portal was gone, though that portal too vanished after Elkon's attack flew through it.

Elkon vanished and reappeared at various spots and heights around the arena once more, firing off a Spatial Projection at the end of each series of teleports. Knowing that the technique warped the very fabric of space that it traveled through, Daisy saw the distortions and sidestepped out of the way as they came at her. After a dozen Spatial Projections that failed to make contact with their intended

target, Elkon teleported to the very center of the arena. He did not hover as high as he did previously, floating only about five or six feet off of the ground.

"For a reincarnation of the creator of space, I was expecting more reality-warping," said Daisy, intense but with a tad bit of playfulness in her tone. At this point, she was midway between the center of the battlefield and the lengthwise edge.

"Be grateful that this mortal body of mine is restricting my true capacities," replied Elkon, a small black orb drifting off his palm. "Underwhelming, I'm well aware. But I can still do this." Unknown to Daisy, it was the same Gravitational Singularity he had used to create Deyanira the Dream Destroyer out of Antasma and Cackletta. Dozens of yards up into the air the black orb went before expanding to twenty times its original size.

Elkon vanished right in time as the now large Gravitational Singularity began sucking in all the air and loose debris around the battlefield. Since Daisy was not anchored to anything, she had to start sprinting in the opposite direction of the powerful pulling forces to avoid getting snatched up into the Gravitational Singularity. Daisy's legs churned at full force to keep her far away from the instant death that loomed above, the very fabric of space-time around the black orb warping and contorting without bounds. The forces that were attracting everything to the singularity seemed to grow ever stronger with each passing second. The battlefield even began to tremble and wobble, making Daisy wonder if the Arena of Absolution as a whole would eventually end up getting pulled into the black orb above.

She kept up her running for as long as she could, maintaining her stride and pace until she began to tire out. If it came to it, she decided then and there that she might have to attempt slipping underneath the arena and diving down to the fortress to make sure she was not pulled into the singularity. Fortunately for her, Elkon's technique didn't last very long. Moments after the singularity started its suction, its gravitational forces reversed and released all the air and debris it pulled in. The black orb dissipated as the space around it reverted back to normal. For the most part, the Arena of Absolution was in the same condition prior to Elkon releasing his

singularity. Daisy stopped in her tracks and turned back around in time to see Elkon reappear near the center of the arena.

"Was that black ball thing of yours supposed to cancel out like that?" asked the Kruna of Earth.

"Yes," said the space distorter. "It's rather unstable and has a timer built in to prevent...well, undesirable outcomes. I'm not a destroyer." He crossed his arms and slashed them through the air, throwing out eight revolving Energy Talons that spread out and diverged in several different directions before converging on Daisy. She leapt up into the air as the Energy Talons swooped in to cut through where she previously stood. As she landed, the talons all angled themselves back at Elkon. The space distorter caught all the talons and repeated the same exact motion to throw them at Daisy again. The tracks the sharp claws of energy soared in were different from the first attempt but acted in the same manner. This time, Daisy rolled backwards to evade the Energy Talons. Elkon's eight projectiles acted like boomerangs as they returned to him, traveling in wide-reaching arcs on their way back to his outstretched arms.

I can't just keep evading his attacks like this, Daisy thought. *If I'm going to win, I'm going to need to get up close to him so I can execute some offense of my own.*

"You're quite shifty," stated Elkon, dispelling his Energy Talons. No sooner than when he finished uttering his sentence was Daisy less than ten yards away with a Crystal Kick forming as she leapt at him. Before Daisy could make contact with her attack, Elkon teleported and reappeared on the arena floor dozens of feet behind her. The Kruna of Earth whiffed, striking nothing but air. Upon landing, she could hear the humming of a technique in the making. What she turned around to see was a massive version of the Hyperbeam he had fired earlier manifesting in front of him.

If I make any further move, he'll teleport out of the way, Daisy thought while Elkon charged his technique. *I'll have to try and make it so that he can't teleport. Maybe I could try to stun him somehow! No, I don't have any stun techniques. Ramona or Marut would though, but they're down at the fortress waiting for me to win! And that's what I intend to do! I have so much I need to win for!*

Elkon forced more energy into his technique, causing the humming of the coalesced energy to increase in pitch. He looked ready to fire it off at any given moment.

Maybe if I can manage to deflect this next attack of his back at him, that will give me the opening I need , Daisy determined in her mind. "Any day now, Elkon!" she called out.

The space distorter laughed yet again, showing more of a lightheartedness that had been otherwise absent – or suppressed – for as long as Daisy and the rest of the Kruna knew him. The slight change in demeanor did not stop him from putting out his attack though. The upgraded version of his Hyperbeam, the Quantum Beam, crackled with pulsating black and white parallel streaks as he aimed it at his adversary and let it loose.

"I think I remember doing this against Kokoro," Daisy mumbled to herself, staggering her stance. "If not, then this is going to hurt."

With a formidable amount of energy concentrated in her fist, Daisy threw an overhead punch directly at the incoming Quantum Beam. Her vertically arcing swing made an egregious bend in the wave as she laid into it. She held firm through the half-second she had in contact with it to drive it off and back at Elkon. The space distorter did not account for a possible deflection and was forced to brace himself against his own Quantum Beam. Though he had his arms up in defense, he was still jolted and shocked by the sheer abundance of power in his technique and was equally alarmed by the fact that Daisy did not just withstand it but also sent it right back at him.

Seizing the sudden opportunity, Daisy rushed at Elkon at full-speed with the intention of landing a critical hit. Once she got close enough, she thrust her elbow with exceptional power into the lower end of Elkon's chest. To the ground he went, but not before skidding along the floor to one of the arena's edges. Daisy dashed at Elkon again, looking to make another hit while she could. The moment she got close however, Elkon flipped a short height into the air and sent a Spatial Projection directly at her. At point-blank range, there was nothing Daisy could do but brace for the jarring hit that rattled her to her core and forced her all the way back to the other side of the battlefield.

"Punching energy attacks; that's just plain reckless," Elkon muttered, touching back down onto the ground.

Daisy managed to stay on her feet and lowered her stance in anticipation of whatever her opponent was going to throw out next. "We're exactly the same..." she murmured in awe, her volume too low for Elkon to hear. "Well, you and Nova me are exactly the same... I've burned up a great deal of energy, but from the looks of it, so have you," She began to smile once more. "This is gonna be a fun finish."

Elkon trudged forward from the edge towards the center of the arena. "I realize all you humans want to do is fight, but fighting is useless unless of course you have true purpose like me, and this is why I'm doing your world a favor by taking the liberty of *wiping out your kind* ."

"Not if I win here," Daisy said without hesitation.

"But you won't win," said Elkon. "Mankind won't win. The world won't win because humanity will not accept defeat. You will lose because you don't understand. You don't understand what I have been through, so won't understand what I understand. You don't understand the concepts of hatred, pain, and suffering, so you won't understand why my goal must be achieved."

Daisy's expression faded to a somber look, appearing much more serious. "I don't understand hatred...pain...or suffering?" She bowed her head. "Are you kidding?"

Elkon stopped moving and spread his arms out to conjure two large spheres above his hands. The two orbs looked nearly identical to his Quantum Beam in terms of aesthetics.

"I'm not discounting the fact that there aren't people that have had it much worse than I have," said Daisy. "In fact, I know that there are plenty with worse experience and it's something that's never lost on me, but I've had my fair share of troubles. They were very trying times for me, and it took all the mental fortitude I had to make sure I didn't end my own life in an attempt to escape from something I never wanted to be in. And still, I wondered if I was better off taking

that escape."

Her words seemed to strike a chord within Elkon. He gasped in subtle surprise.

"It was either die, or live in death," she continued. As she brought out her left arm from her body, her Final Crystal Fist took form around her hand. "You think I don't understand pain? Pain is all I've ever known." With blazing eyes, she raised her head to stare down her foe. "And pain is what has gotten me this far."

"I... What," Elkon stuttered, unsure of what to say. He was sensing something in Daisy's tone that he was having difficulty trying to make out.

"...For better, or worse, and everywhere and anywhere in between," the Kruna of Earth murmured. Her Final Crystal Fist acquired a brilliant sheen at the conclusion of its formation. Her voice rose, declaring without a hint of doubt, "And I am grateful for the pain that I have had to go through!"

Elkon was taken aback by the images that began to dominate his mind. Visions of obtaining the Master Pendant, of the Kruna first standing against him and all the later times they would meet, of his creation of the godlike titan Deyanira and her drive for vengeance and chaos, of Grekka and his submission to his hatred under the Master Pendant's influence, and of the ice wielder's last words before his death all collectively overtook his mind in vivid imagery. All these events were trying to tell him something, but he could not decipher the message in a way clear enough for him to understand. Whatever the message was, it made him call into question everything he put into the grand odyssey he had set into motion.

"I owe it to all the lives that have been lost," Daisy asserted. "Those that were lost in Senka, all those in Kareah, and the countless people who have come before me who fought for the common good. And yes, don't think I forgot about Grekka!" She crouched down, ready to rocket forward at a moment's notice. "I owe it to all those who had and still have it worse off than me. I must do everything that I can to improve the world, to ease the suffering of everyone...to bring long-lasting peace and restrain the malevolent forces that have

plagued our lands for so long!"

Some form of idea tried to manifest within Elkon's mind, an idea that he was doing all he could to unravel with clarity. He peered at each of the masses of energy he created, wondering if the outcome of the next battle sequence would really matter.

"So you're right; I do have a debt to pay back to the world," said Daisy. "And if I have to get past you so that I can start paying it off, then that's what I'm going to do!"

With so much on his mind to ponder, Elkon didn't respond to Daisy immediately. *This earth wielder and her team have been unfaltering in their quest against against me,* he said in thought. *They're not stubborn, I'm sure that has become evident enough. Do they understand something that I don't? Are they enlightened in some aspect that I have overlooked? The fighter who stands before me now has definitely changed from our first meeting, that is without question. Maybe I've misjudged this group of elemental wielders; especially you, Daisy. This changes things.*

The space distorter took a deep breath, his eyelids drifting halfway closed. "That's quite a bit of maturity I hear in your voice," he then said. He returned the power flow from his energy spheres to within his body and dispelled the orbs. In a surprising and unforeseen move, he dropped his guard.

"What? Why did you stop?" asked Daisy, stern in her demeanor.

Elkon gave no response. He lowered his head and allowed his gaze to shift to the side.

Chapter XXXVII

Legacy of Hatred – The World that was Transparent :

"I have...encountered...a worthy opponent," Elkon murmured. Although he kept his hood on his head, his face was clearly visible with minimal shadowing. "Someone who has been able to stand against me in more ways than one. I don't think we need to come to fists to settle this."

Daisy broke from her offensive stance and stood straight, her iconic steely resolve holding true.

"You speak truth, your tone is solid, your words are without hesitation," said Elkon. "I may have been guilty of holding a grudge against you since you are indeed the daughter of King Sarasa."

The Kruna of Earth disbanded her Final Crystal Fist, sensing that there was now no need for the technique. *You'll find that the link between your father and Elkon is a lot more intricate than you could have ever imagined* , she remembered Master Terran say. *If I were to tell you myself, you would simply set out to destroy him, without knowing the whole story; the crucial story. And even if you succeed on that path, you'll ultimately fail in saving this world in the long run because humanity will not be able to benefit from the comprehension and wisdom that right now is only achievable through him.*

"But, does that automatically mean that I am in the wrong and you are in the right?" said Elkon. "No, not at all. It doesn't change the fact that you are fighting for a race of gluttons and overlords that feast at the expense of those whose voices are never heard and eventually cease before their lives had a chance to fully play out. Your father is a prime example of this; I need not say more."

Daisy took a deep breath. "You know who my father is; you said you knew him and what he did, and then you said that my father forced you to kill your family and friends."

"Yes, I did," Elkon replied in confirmation. "I do not lie."

"I need to ask you something then," said Daisy. "But first I need to know; why did you station such ruthless and vile beings in the shrines as guardians? I can tell that you're not of the same caliber as they were in terms of savagery."

"The Flame Behemoth was a simple beast that I took control of," said Elkon. "I believe it was from a lava-covered world with a magma tide and an array of fiery creatures, of which the Flame Behemoth was the most powerful. Antasma and Cackletta both wanted to exact their vengeance, specifically on the Mario Brothers and Bowser. Vodyanoy, Gargoyle Nukpana, and Kokoro all wanted the Master Pendant."

Daisy grimaced. "Right, that damned piece of jewelry. What's so special about it?"

"The Master Pendant is one of the most powerful of the many Pendants of Power scattered throughout your world. The gem possessed a collection of abilities that made it highly sought after by power-hungry beings who wanted it to assist them in whatever their endeavors were. The aforementioned water demon, gargoyle, and Soul Stealer along with two other beings offered their services to me in exchange for possession of the Master Pendant, although I did not tell any of them about each other since they would have otherwise slaughtered one another. The two other beings were the ones that were dismissed from the Light Shrine and Shadow Shrine."

Daisy nodded. "So then the evils that you accuse humanity of are not just limited to man, if all of those beings you just mentioned were lusting after a pendant of such power to use for their nefarious purposes!"

Elkon paused for a moment, taking in what the Kruna of Earth had just said. "I suppose you're right..."

"So how can you attribute humanity as the singular cause of all that is wrong in the world while ignoring the fact that there are so many people out there that are living their lives the right way just as there

are non-humans who are worse than a large portion of mankind?"

"For you to say 'worse' is inaccurate and, in ways, subjective," Elkon replied. "Looking back now, it was entirely wrong of me to use and manipulate those beings in the way that I did, regardless of their morality or lack thereof. But at the time, nothing mattered more than doing whatever it took to make sure that the evils of humanity were quelled, even if it meant using other evils as counterbalance. In this bleak and morose era in which geopolitical and sociopolitical values are decaying in tandem with a moral collapse of society, an otherwise pre-apocalyptic scenario has manifested that only the most powerful and domineering of leaders are thriving in, or even surviving in for that matter. Humanity brought this upon itself without the assistance of any outside malevolence. I am sick to my soul to be considered a part of your race."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that," stated Daisy. "I could say that you're being entirely hypocritical, but that would be wrong of me. Because for as much as you have done, for as far as you have taken this situation, you have to have some reason, some purpose behind your actions. You can't be the threat that we all believed you were."

Elkon gave no reply, but listened with full focus. Not a single word uttered by the Nova fighter was lost on him.

"I feel like I can help you out," said the Kruna of Earth. "As we were fighting, I noticed something I couldn't explain at the time. I noticed that in a very strange and unorthodox way, it felt like we could have even been friends. It's hard to explain, but I felt like there was something that happened that pushed you onto your current course and made you feel like you couldn't go down any other path. And yet...I still don't really know anything about you... So I ask if you could tell me more."

Elkon raised an eyebrow. "Tell you more? I spared enough time bothering to say what you have just heard from me, and now you want me to reveal more?"

"Please," Daisy said, calm but intense in her voice and her expression. "I want to hear your story. Then I'll give you my final word, and from there, you'll be able to decide how you want the next

string of events to play out."

"...You have an unprecedented gift of intuition," Elkon said under his breath. He paused, hesitating for only a couple seconds before saying, "Very well."

"So what do you guys think is going on up there?" asked Marut, staring up into the sky to catch the faint shape of the Arena of Absolution.

"The hell if I know," Andrew muttered, arms crossed. "Without anything anchoring itself to the ground, it's a wonder how the arena's even floating in midair."

"I don't know what to make of it," Athelstan murmured. "First, there were tons of fireworks, and then, nothing!"

"Yeah, and then there was a whole lotta wind up there too!" said Marut. "And it wasn't even me doing that!"

"Considering we gave all of our available elemental energy to Daisy, you shouldn't be able to knock over a house of cards, Marut," Bowser remarked.

"Is the fight over?" Ramona wondered, apprehension audible in her voice. "What does this mean? Did Daisy win or lose?"

"No way she lost!" exclaimed Athelstan. "She vowed to win! We shouldn't expect anything less from her!"

"It's possible," said Ramona. "I don't mean to be pessimistic, but we can't deny the chance that it just wasn't enough. I mean, we were all pretty worn out when we donated our remaining energy to her already low amount. What if all our energy together just...couldn't overcome Elkon?"

"No," said Bowser, calm but focused. "Both their energy signatures are still vibrant and well."

"So the action between the two must have just paused," said Warra.

"They haven't done anything at all for a little while. I would not think that a standoff would last this long, regardless of the reason."

"And that means Daisy hasn't lost, Ramona," said Marut.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," Ramona replied. "I needn't doubt her."

"She's the best chance we have," said Bowser. "That's why we gave her our energy. She'll pull through."

"But why would they stop?" Warra asked in mounting frustration.

"It's true," Elkon began. "No mortal is supposed to be able to manipulate space itself. Spatial control has been one of the many abilities considered immoral to be accessible to mortal beings. There were a handful of exceptions that came into the world however that did have access to a select 'forbidden' ability, and I was one of them. Of course, at the time, I did not know of my status as the reincarnation of the creator of space."

Daisy stood across from Elkon, still in Nova Form but without any intent of initiating conflict. She was certain that Elkon's words were valuable information that could not be overlooked, especially since he offered to share them.

"It was said by many that my birth would bring about a great change to our world," Elkon continued. "But I never knew what it meant, and I went through life with very definite limits that I put on myself to make sure I didn't actually screw anything up in the world with my abilities...until one fateful day...when your father decided to invade my home, to completely overrun my town and nation altogether with his expansive military might."

Daisy's face turned grim, as if she already knew where Elkon was going with his story.

"My hometown, the town that was overwhelmed by these militant forces, was in the same region that the Stone Shrine is in now – my hometown was what occupied what is now the vast and overwhelming Abnoba Desert of the present-day."

"Well, except for the fact that the Dimension of the Lost has melded with that area," Daisy said in reminder.

"But do you know why that area had become a mountainous desert in the first place?" asked Elkon. "Your father decided he wanted to show off Sarasaland's power by laying waste to my entire province, what was formerly known as Devia before its destruction."

"No way..." Daisy said in a near whisper. "I barely remember seeing ruins or any semblance of structure there other than the Stone Shrine..."

"On the eastern continent of the world, Sarasaland's power grew as King Sarasa imposed his will on the lands little by little, nation by nation, territory by territory. Although he never gained control of the whole of the East, the West scrutinized and criticized him and his militaristic decisions. King Sarasa was infuriated by this, believing his way to be superior and determining that all outside opinions and oppositions to his ways were a threat his existence and that of Sarasaland's. To quell and suppress the powers of the West, he sent forces across the Continental Ocean to not only overpower a western province, but to annihilate it into oblivion. He hoped his move would inspire fear that would silence the voices coming from the West, giving him the free will to go about his tyrannical business without resistance. Going for an inland territory was a way of further showcasing his power. And he just so happened to pick Devia as his western conquest...or so I thought."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Daisy.

"He had a particular reason for choosing Devia," said Elkon. "Before his assault, life was pleasant for me, even though I never knew what the future held or how much my future was impacted by who I was. My favorite thing to do in my spare time when I wasn't in school was to stand or float around outside and bask in the infinite glory and beauty of nature. My abilities were rarely used for the most part, only active when necessary to complete certain tasks that were considered unapproachable to others. Even though I had kept the use of my powers limited, I had garnered a reputation for my dimensional abilities and was well known throughout the lands as a space distorter, both on the western side of the world and the

eastern side. Unfortunately, that meant your father was also well aware of my existence and capabilities. As a result, I became a target for King Sarasa's forces in their assault."

"But why would Sarasaland target you? For what purpose?"

Elkon didn't respond immediately, almost appearing to get a little choked up before he answered Daisy's question. "They knew the powers that I had, powers that operated outside the realm of the eight elements, so their primary objective upon reaching Devia was to track me down...and then force me to join their military in hopes of being able to take advantage of my power for the benefit of their own nation."

"But why didn't you fight back?" asked Daisy. "Or at least try to escape and get to safety?"

"They gave me no choice," was Elkon's response. "Under the early evening sun, they stormed through my town, caring not for whoever they killed in the process, and found me in my house with my family. When they saw me, the commander of that squadron told me that from that point on, I was property of Sarasaland. He said that if I did not follow their orders, they would kill me on the spot. His soldiers raised their earth and ice weapons in confirmation – not like the elemental tools that your team carries, no, these were maniacal manipulations of some of the aspects of the very nature that I loved. There was no chance for escape. But first, before anything else could happen, they demanded that I kill my own parents and my brothers...and if I didn't, they would imprison them and give them the longest, slowest death that my parents and siblings could tolerate as penalty for my insubordination."

"I can't believe...the cruelty of it all," the Kruna of Earth murmured.

"King Sarasa's militants then forced me to aid them in flattening Devia, with the constant threat of death on the spot if I did not comply. Not a single person was left alive, and not a single building was left standing. I was believed to be dead along with the rest of the population of Devia. While under King Sarasa's control, I was given a new identity and was known across the lands as Erebus."

That must be why Rosalina was never able to find any records of Elkon that didn't end in his death , Daisy thought.

Elkon sighed. "I was forced to do anything and everything to fuel King Sarasa's hubris. I have laid waste to nation upon nation over the years, though I have never wanted to bring any of them to ruin. Like I said to you earlier, I am not a destroyer. But there was nothing I could do; they either forced me to do their deeds of destruction for them, or they would threaten to kill me and initiate the annihilation anyways, oftentimes with several 'sample incentives' that they would commit to remind me that there were only two outcomes: either everyone dies, or everyone dies and I die along with them. Days would pass, and lands would be ravaged, so many lives lost...and I had to be the one to bring about the murder. So many children taken from their parents, romances ruined, buildings reduced to rubble; so many people, good or bad, I was forced to execute. So much carnage and gore I was forced to carry on my hands and in my soul, the tears shed every day I was shoved onto the battlefield, the ranks behind me rattling off their weapons of annihilation... The mass slaughter I had to carry out was unbearable, and with each life wasted, another parcel of my spirit died as well. On one occasion, I considered both killing myself as well as just defying them so that they would kill me, both so that I could prevent them from abusing my abilities and at the very least quell the intolerable lament in my spirit by knowing that I would not be able to add to my death toll if I myself was dead. However, I realized that even if I died, war would still continue on. Humans would find a way to continue their battles and self-destruction. It mattered not whether it would be me or someone else doing it; innocent people who never imagined the hardships of war would be stripped of their lives. Your father actually intended to use me to overrun the Koopa Clan, but the Toadstool family had beaten us to the punch."

Daisy closed her eyes, breathing heavily. As her eyes reopened, a slight frown developed across her austere face.

"That's when I came to the realization that no matter what happened, there would always be violence and hatred in the world," said Elkon. "All of it is fueled by greed, lust, jealousy and envy. In the battle for supremacy, one side, or one person, may win it all, but

in the process, thousands upon thousands more *lose* it all. What a pitiable shame it is for a race that has such a talent to create and manipulate use those talents for destruction. Humans defeat the purpose of their existence through their own actions. How senseless it is, for such an intelligent race to be so ignorant and blind to its own shortcomings. But in the end, who truly knows anything? It is so painstakingly difficult to try and say for people, because they don't want to admit what they don't know."

A soft breeze blew through the Arena of Absolution. For as far up as the two had been, the wind had been scarce. Daisy paid Elkon her undivided attention as he continued with his story. "As time went on, I became more accustomed to the powers that I had rarely used before I was a part of King Sarasa's military. My skills and abilities opened up, and I was able to do more with my powers than I ever thought possible. Sarasaland eventually gained control over three-quarters of the East, at which point I decided that I just couldn't take it anymore. I had only just recently learned how to traverse dimensions, so I busted free from my shackles and slipped away through my own portal late one night. I found myself lost here in the Twelfth Dimension, and made this place my new home as I traveled across other dimensions, exploring worlds and looking for answers to an almost overwhelming problem. I learned much about your world – our world – and its past, recent, ancient, and in between. The horrible and sad truth is there have been humans identical in being and character to King Sarasa throughout history, much more than you would believe. It's these people that have tended to leave behind the most damage in their wake. To make it worse, they ruined the beauty of nature and the world with every megalomaniac rampage they embarked on." He paused for a moment before asking, "Do you recall Necromancer and Necropaladin?"

"Yes," replied Daisy. "At the Stone Shrine. I remember them both."

"Necromancer and Necropaladin both were reanimated vessels for the spirits of my two brothers that I had killed," said Elkon. "Their spirits would grow bitter and they would develop nothing but scorn and hatred for mankind as the years passed by. I had initially created the dimensional rift at the Stone Shrine so that I could cross over to the Dimension of the Lost and contact them. They managed

to understand and forgive me for what I did to them, knowing that I was forced to in yet another power grab produced by humanity over all the years of its existence. They saw that humanity had no hope for repair; they saw how broken it was, and foresaw how shattered it would become in the future. But just as with any soul in purgatory, in a seemingly endless unrest, they had to be laid to theirs. And much like The Crestfallen, they needed to vent themselves in their fight against your teammates to ease their torment. Unfortunately, their hatred was far more than that collectively contained within all of The Crestfallen, and because of that, they may never be able to truly be liberated. Such tortured souls, they may very well be in purgatory for eternity."

Daisy nodded. "I understand... And I am sorry, Elkon..."

"One of the biggest problems in the world today is a lack of understanding," said Elkon. "This inability to be understood can be a driving motivator in many an endeavor. For you see, everyone wants to talk, but many voices end up going unheard."

"Your voice will not go unheard today," Daisy assured. "Please, finish."

Chapter XXXVIII

Evil Takes Form :

"After I had initially talked to my brothers in the Dimension of the Lost, I knew that I had to do something," said Elkon, continuing his story. "I knew I had to make the necessary change the world needed, just as it was said I would do before I was conceived."

Nova Daisy stood, the palms of her hands resting on her upper arms as she listened to the words of a victim of her father's gross tyrannical ways. She suppressed all that she felt towards her father so that she could focus on what Elkon had to say.

"You should be well aware by now that humans have been abusing nature for quite a while, and not just for war and conflict," stated Elkon. "But using the elements of our world in war was crossing the line, and forcing me to do what I did was beyond intolerable. The time to make that great change had come, and I would be the one to usher it in. However, the idea that I eventually put into motion came to me unintentionally."

Daisy cocked an eyebrow up a bit with a modest display of confusion on her face. "How's that?"

"Shortly after departing from the Stone Shrine, I came across an abandoned pendant," Elkon said. "This pendant actually happened to be one of the many Pendants of Power spread throughout the world, but it wasn't just any Pendant of Power. It was the Master Pendant, one of the most powerful of the bunch ever created. Its abilities were split, some being known while others shrouded in mystery. I don't know what came over me, but a funny feeling registered in my body. It was a sensation that made me feel compelled to pick up the pendant, as if the gem itself was calling out to me."

"And so you took it with you. But did you ever wear it?"

"I took it with me, but I did not wear it. I took it under the impression

that it would be safe with me and out of the way of someone who would otherwise use it for whatever vile malevolence they intended to use it for. I felt I had to take it, because if it had managed to get into the wrong hands, it would mean trouble for not just humanity and not just your world, but many worlds. I didn't think I needed the power boost from the gem nor did I think I could use the gem for myself until I noticed that it had very strange...properties, and that it was rife with impurities. It was these impurities the Master Pendant had that allowed me to tamper with and corrupt the elements, and, you know the rest. Why it was abounding with impurities, I don't know." He paused for a moment, thinking back to the events at his tower. "Why it elicited the effects it did on Grekka, I have absolutely no idea whatsoever. I wish I did, but with all the knowledge I had gained, I had also gained the truth that it is absolutely impossible to know everything. Even the knowledge I had and have now is on less than two percent of the universe at the very most. When I gave Grekka the Master Pendant, I intended for him to assist me in my plan, not for him to go ballistic in seemingly uncontrolled rage."

Daisy bowed her head. "I see..."

"As we stand here today, King Sarasa exhibits control over a vast majority of the eastern continent," said Elkon. "I don't believe he ever intended on stopping. When I was a part of his forces, their plans and tactics were geared towards using me in as many ways as possible. I was seen and treated as the ultimate weapon of mass destruction. When I managed to escape, a large gap was created in his military strategy. This allowed other nations a chance to fight back and regain control of their lands, but it didn't last for long. Sarasaland would eventually rebound and slowly regain its conquests. I expect he wants to expand into the West soon."

"Yeah, he probably will," Daisy murmured, thinking back to what Terran had disclosed to her. In regards to her father, Terran had said almost the exact same thing that Elkon was telling her now.

A short silence followed, a silence that felt like eternity and would have gone on for as long had Elkon not decided to speak up. "I have told you my story, just as you asked. So what response do you have to present?"

Daisy's eyes closed as she took a deep breath, the kind of breath that relaxed a person so much that that person could, for a moment, feel partial numbness overtaking their body. She was quiet for a little while, though Elkon waited for her to give her response without question. She slowly uncrossed her arms, returning them to her sides. When she reopened her eyes, her tone was muted, yet resolute. "You may be right. I understand everything that you're saying. Even though I never experienced everything that you had to experience, I can feel everything that you felt. It's hard to explain, and I can't grasp or make sense of how, but I know that I'm able to feel and understand your experiences as if I was there myself. How clear it is, I can't say for sure."

"...Yes," said Elkon. "Go on..."

"But even if I understand you now," Daisy continued. "That doesn't change my stance against your desire to end humanity."

"...Then you want to settle things with me?" Elkon asked. "Is that it?"

"I do," the Kruna of Earth answered. "But my master, Terran, believed in me, and said that my team and I would have to figure out what it meant to be a hero as we went through our journey against you. And he didn't mean that we had to figure out how to appear to be a hero or how to think or see ourselves as heroes, no, we had to figure out what it meant to be true heroes. And in the world we live in, with all that you and I both have had to experience and all that countless other people have to experience, with all that is wrong and all that needs to be fixed, true heroes are needed now more than ever. I trust and believe in him wholeheartedly, because he was more of a father to me than my actual dad. But I don't think knowing the meaning of heroism is as crucial to our mission as he said it was. Truth is, I don't think myself or my teammates can actually define what it means to be a hero, nor do we want to even try to. So maybe we won't ever know what true heroism really is. That's not what we're here to do. But we're on this quest, standing against you because the world needs us to." Her face perked up and her expression turned fierce. "So that's it – that's my answer!"

Elkon frowned, showing disappointment from Daisy's statements. "That's your response? You think by defeating me, by killing me,

you'll restore order and justice to this land? No, you won't, because people of all walks and ways of life will continue their warring ways just as they always have. Because there will always be those trying to assert dominance and supremacy, there will always be suffering and pain forced upon others. I have experienced this first hand in ways deemed unimaginable. There is no possible way that you can put an end to that unless you put an end to all of humanity."

"I'm not here to defeat you or kill you," said Daisy, unshaken in her demeanor. "I'm here to say, there has got to be a better way to solve the issues of the world than yours. We shouldn't need mass genocide over all of humanity just to make the world a better place."

"Then I suppose you expect me to stand idly by until you somehow magically pick out and restrain all of the corrupt and unjust humans in the world?" asked Elkon. When Daisy nodded in response, a hint of irritation became audible in the space distorter's voice. "...Why should I?"

A short, tense silence followed for a few seconds before Elkon spoke again. "What's so compelling that I must put my trust in you? Why should I abort my way in favor of your way?"

"Because ending all of humanity...is just another form of giving up."

Elkon gasped, shaken by the Kruna of Earth's bold statement. And yet, he couldn't help but notice the validity of her words. *How could she say something like that?* he wondered. *It's so absurd! But it's so...it's...is it truth? Has my mission been a facade? Have I already given up long ago?*

"I'll tell you what I told Kokoro," said Daisy. "It's in my name. My master bestowed upon me the task of revitalizing a name with new meaning, a name that my father had ruined, and I must honor his final wishes by doing just that. I choose to define my name by the way I live and have lived my life. My name is defined by upholding an unfaltering will in the face of endless adversity, and it is my responsibility to not stop or give up! I will stand true to my name, and I will succeed! I can promise you that."

"After all that's happened, past and present, how can you be so

sure?" Elkon asked, his voice beginning to tremble. He wasn't sure what to think or what to believe anymore. "How can you stand there and tell me that as if you know for a fact that you will? How do you expect to go up against these insurmountable odds and succeed? Do you really think you'll never stray from that mindset and self-belief? All the corruption and greed, pain and suffering, hatred and destruction in the world, and you expect me to believe that you'll somehow quell all of it? You know you will have to deal with your father sooner or later. You'll have to muster the mentality to stand against him to have any hope of bringing him down. Or better yet, how do I know you're not going to turn out like him even if you adhere to your values?! How can you be so confident and sure in yourself?!"

"...Because I understand," Daisy said, soft and true. "I can listen. And I can comprehend. I've been through despair too. You're not the only one..."

At that moment, memories of her past troubles began to flood through her mind. She remembered being a kid and the whole of Sarasaland turning on her, her strict and authoritative parents, Terran being dismissed after being around the castle for less than a year, her failed attempt at killing herself, and her failed attempt to flee with Terran under the cover of night. Her parents at that point began clamping down on her already limited freedoms, forcing her into over four mind numbing years of lifelessness and despair where it was her against all of Sarasaland, concluded by her father's decision to hand her over to Tatanga and his alien race to live a life as a human generator that would have likely ended in a very early death. Then Mario stepped in out of nowhere and saved her from that fate before she reached the point of no return, but it proved to only be a meager moral victory. She was left alone in the world with nowhere to go, and even when she made the decision to take residence in the Mushroom Kingdom, it never felt natural. Everyone was so different from her, and while she was welcome at kingdom-wide events every once in a while, she always felt left out, ignored, expendable... *unnecessary.* On so many occasions, it made her wonder again, almost too many times to count; why? Why was she here? Why not just give up and die? And yet somehow, something inside her just wouldn't let her do it. Something inside her refused to

let her die, even though she hated herself and hated how she could never go through with the action. It's this will that has carried her through this daunting and harrowing odyssey from the get-go and that has brought her to stand against the reincarnation of the creator of space.

"I'm still despairing, deep down," said the Kruna of Earth, her voice somber. "I might have to despair for the rest of my life. I don't know..." Her mind was pulled back to her fight with Grekka. *How easily that could have been me,* she thought. *If I were to give up... If I had ever let my hatred and pain consume me... If our roles were reversed, I would have had the Master Pendant, and the events that led up to this moment would have been exactly the same.*

"But, I'm confident in myself...and sure of myself," Daisy murmured, growing solemn and steadfast. "Because for almost my entire life, I was the only one that could be confident in and sure of myself. I admit, I've questioned why I do many times in the past, but there's no doubt that I do. I am by no means the ideal kind of person or candidate to be seen as any sort of role model for the world, and that's fine as long as I stay true to who I am, not who someone else wants me to be. But if my faith in myself were to stop, if all of a sudden I gave up and let the will to fight on die, then I wouldn't be me, and I would fail against the odds, and I would become the true villain in all of this for letting everyone down. I sure wouldn't be the person my master had faith in for the limited time that he was in my life. My master entrusted me with stopping my father because I'm the only one who can. And because I can stop my own dad, I can take on the evils of the world. If I wasn't me, then I wouldn't stand a chance against him, and I sure wouldn't stand a chance against the other malevolent entities in our reality. That's why I'm asking you to believe in me, to believe in who I am, because no matter how tough it gets, no matter how much pain befalls me, no matter how stacked the odds are against me, I'll keep pushing, I'll keep fighting, I'll keep pressing forward, and I'll walk on. I'll do it all because that's who I am, and that's who I've always been."

Elkon's eyes flared wide open. The tension and angst in his face seemed to fade away. He did not respond immediately, but relaxed his eyes and spoke with calm when he did. "You gave meaning to

who *you* are. If who you are inside you were to ever change, then you would be a completely different person altogether. You would not be Daisy Sarasa."

The Kruna of Earth's steely resolve was all Elkon needed to know that he had interpreted her correctly. Elkon continued speaking, several brief but noticeable pauses in between his sentences. "We are both humans, sharing the same world, from two very different lives and beginnings. When you started your campaign against me, you originally thought of me as nothing more than a threat to your world, a threat to your way of life. You assumed me to be evil, but you've since become aware of the true evils of our reality. You have the power, and you are wholeheartedly willing to put it towards the betterment of the common good. The sad truth is, there is a very real possibility that you may never actually succeed in quelling these evils. You and your world may be doomed to having to withstand these evils for as long as reality persists. And yet, you are certain that however slim that chance may be, you will prevail."

Another breeze shuffled through the Arena of Absolution. Elkon waited for the wind to die down before he said anything more. "You remind me a lot of myself when I was younger, full of hope and fearless of the future. Unfortunately, after King Sarasa took hold of me, I was never the same. I was so full of hopelessness, pain, despair, and I never saw anything other than that, so I never expected anything different from my life or the world, and only prepared for things to get worse. I only foresaw more pain and more despair for me and for everyone... But, for some reason that I can't even begin to explain, you give me the vision of a different kind of world from the one I have seen; who you are gives me hope for a different future from the one that our world was seemingly doomed to head towards."

A longer pause followed, the reincarnation of the creator of space quiet and without movement. Daisy stood perfectly still, equally as motionless as him. The red and pink hues of the sky of the Twelfth Dimension had not changed tone the whole time the Kruna were there, as if the whole of the realm was timeless.

"You certainly are a curious individual, Daisy," Elkon finally said. "I think I will believe in you after all."

Elkon raised an arm high and swung it down in front of him. The Arena of Absolution jerked and began its descent back down to the fortress.

"Hey! The arena's coming down!" Marut exclaimed.

The Kruna watched as the Arena of Absolution slowly returned from high above in the sky. As it came nearer to its resting place, the elemental wielders could not help but notice something very strange concerning its descent.

"I sense Daisy...and Elkon!" said Bowser.

"Me too!" Marut hollered.

"I would hope it's safe to say that we all can," said Andrew.

"Why are we sensing both of them?" Warra wondered aloud.

Several moments passed before the arena had lowered all the way back down to the fortress roof. Sure enough, when the Arena of Absolution finally stopped in its original resting place, Nova Daisy and Elkon both stood ten yards apart from each other. The Kruna all ran up the staircase and onto the arena to regroup with their teammate.

"What happened?" asked Ramona.

"Should we be concerned that Elkon's still standing there?" asked Athelstan.

"It's alright," said Elkon. "I won't be here for long. All I'm going to do here is make a new choice." At the wave of a hand, a large portal opened up behind him at the far side of the Arena of Absolution opposite the staircase that led onto it. He then raised both his arms straight up as they began to glow.

"Wait, what are you doing?" asked Marut.

"I will give all seven of you a portion of my life force," said Elkon. "I

pray that it may be a significant boost to the power of each one of you."

"Elkon..." Daisy murmured, showing a look of surprise. "That's not necessary."

"Yes, it is," the reincarnation of the creator of space replied. "It is entirely necessary. I have a debt I must pay back to you all for the troubles I have caused you." He smiled, subtle yet sincere. "It's the least I can do." A golden, wispy aura erupted from the glow of Elkon's arms.

"When you said that you're giving us each a portion of your life force, what exactly did you mean?" asked Warra. "How much?!"

Elkon closed his eyes, maintaining his smile. He didn't feel a need to answer that question. Daisy's expression was blank, as if she read Elkon's body language and knew what he meant. The rest of the Kruna looked at his arms, the aura around his upper extremities growing in intensity. A quiet ambience pervaded the atmosphere.

"You were the reincarnation of the creator of space," said Daisy. "How do you know you'll come back?"

Elkon chuckled. "But you see, I don't know, and that's just another facet of the beauty of reality." He opened his eyes. "We never know anything for sure."

The golden aura bolted to the solar plexus of each of the Kruna, momentarily imbuing all seven of them with a bright, lively glow as Elkon's life force was evenly divided and added to their own. Their bodies were jolted, tingling sensations and feelings of weightlessness overtaking the seven elemental wielders until Elkon finished transferring all of his life force. The glow around the Kruna then receded and the surreal sensations ceased, but each of them felt noticeably more powerful than before, if not substantially.

"Besides, I'm supposed to be dead," Elkon joked as he lowered his arms.

"According to the Comet Observatory, anyways," Daisy added.

"Regardless, one reincarnation should be enough," replied Elkon. "I shouldn't be reincarnated again. No one should, unless there was some special purpose they needed to serve that required such a condition."

"Unreal..." Andrew murmured. "This power boost-"

"Is insane," Marut finished, shifting his eyes between his arms.

"This is what a seventh of Elkon's life force feels like," Warra said in a near whisper.

"I wouldn't say my power doubled, but hell, I'll take it!" said Athelstan. "I think some of my elemental energy has been replenished too!"

"Yeah, I noticed that as well!" replied Andrew, creating a wisp of darkness in his hand.

"I suppose it's safe to say that's the case with us all," added Ramona.

Bowser gazed at himself, taking note of his amplified energy. He could feel his veins coursing with invigorated vitality, flowing with more efficiency than ever before. Although not mind blowing, the power increase could not be ignored.

"This is much appreciated, Elkon," Ramona thanked with a bow.

"You're very much welcome," said Elkon, his face starting to lose vigor. "The portal that I have created will lead you away from this realm and to the outskirts of the Mushroom Kingdom. I'm sorry about Grekka."

"It's okay," Daisy replied. "It's okay. It wasn't your fault."

"Grekka was correct in his final words," said Elkon. "The corruption of the elements has stemmed from the overall corruption of mankind. In the coming days, you will have to confront malevolence, villainy, and hatred in order to truly instill a lasting order of peace and justice. You all will, but especially you, Daisy; and I believe you're well aware why."

The Kruna of Earth nodded in full understanding of Elkon's statement.

Sweat beaded on Elkon's head as he spoke. "In your travels, you will see that the dystopia that you exist in today is ever devolving as evils continue to try and contort it in whatever way they see necessary to elicit their personal prosperity. The safety and comforts of a well-supported suburban community mask its inhabitants to what may be occurring on the opposite side of the globe, where safety and comfort have never been introduced to the vocabulary of the people trying to survive in a chronically hostile environment. You all now carry a hefty burden, the consequences beyond grave and dire should you fail, should you ever give up. But you must not be discouraged from this seemingly insurmountable task, none of you. I've seen enough to know that you're all capable of accomplishing this, and I'm convinced that you're the most capable of any group of people. I entrust you all with the purification of mankind."

"We promise to use the elements in the name of order and justice," Daisy calmly declared.

Elkon smiled. "It's funny. As I stand here now, I wonder...if the necessary change I was supposed to make was to bring you to the call of duty, Daisy. I wonder if my destiny was to awaken you so that you could move closer to yours." He paused, shifting his gaze to the Koopa King. "You did good, Bowser. Very good."

Bowser gasped, surprised by Elkon's acknowledgment. He kept a collected composure, replying, "Thank you."

"Well...this is it for me," said Elkon, his voice fading. "I leave the rest to all of you..." At the conclusion of his sentence, he buckled and collapsed to the ground. The Kruna gathered around Elkon's lifeless body, all of them at a loss for words. It was not the ending any of them expected. They thought they would have been celebrating a victory over Elkon, but they were instead quiet and subdued. None of them would have been able to predict or foresee this turn of events.

"He wasn't bad at all," Daisy murmured, breaking the momentary silence. "He was just misguided is all. In the end though, he was

vital. Vital to us all."

"What do you mean by that?" Andrew asked Daisy. "What happened up there when you were fighting him?"

Daisy didn't respond immediately, lost in thought for a brief moment. "I'll tell you guys when we get back," the Kruna of Earth assured. "I think we should all be grateful for this journey that we took on. I think it's something we all needed."

"I agree," said Bowser. "I very much agree."

"You know, it was pretty fun," said Marut, rubbing behind his head with a hand. "Definitely a welcome break from my life."

"I second that, Marut," Andrew replied.

"Definitely thrilling," added Ramona. "I didn't know whether I was supposed to be excited or scared!"

"You know, I think if I had the choice, I'd do it all over!" Athelstan thought aloud. "Maybe with a new challenge like having to run up against all the shrine guardians one after the other with limited recovery!"

Ramona hesitated before she responded at an accelerated pace with, "Well I don't know about any of that."

Everyone in the group laughed, prompting Ramona herself to laugh too. Daisy however, was not laughing with the rest of the Kruna. A stern look across her face, she blankly stared off into the distance.

"What's wrong, Daisy?" Bowser asked the Kruna of Earth.

"And why haven't you returned to normal?" Warra asked. "Why have you stayed in Nova Form this whole time?"

"Yeah, we've won!" Athelstan cheered. "Mission's over! Threat's gone! I think we all did an excellent job!"

"...I don't know," Daisy replied. "Something just seems...amiss. I feel the need to stay in Nova Form but I can't quite explain why. It just

feels like we're being... *watched* ."

"Nonsense," said Athelstan. "We're done here! You can relax!"

"Workaholic much?" Andrew commented with sarcasm.

"I think you're just being a bit foolish," said Bowser. "I mean, unless Rollodillo, Dino Piranha, or, God forbid, Whomp King, actually somehow managed to make it out of that tower – let alone find their way here to this fortress – then I don't get why you're so unsettled, Daisy. And even then, those guys were not that big of an issue! Just go back to base form already and relax."

"I don't know," Daisy muttered. "Maybe when we pass through the portal, but for right now, something just feels very eerie."

"Suit yourself," replied Andrew.

"I...have...the power!" Marut echoed. He hurled a large gust of wind up into the air with velocity he would have been unable to muster prior to receiving his portion of Elkon's life force. His updraft rippled through the air above the fortress before dissipating at a markedly higher altitude.

"Melodramatic bastard," Bowser joked. Everyone burst out laughing.

"I wonder if I can one-hit kill Piranha Plants now," Marut mused aloud.

"Not likely," Andrew replied.

"You're not giving those plants enough credit, Marut," said Warra.

"How big of a tornado I can make now?!" Marut hollered in excitement.

"And we're moving along now!" Bowser flatly exclaimed, walking towards the dimensional portal.

Suddenly, a bright pink light illuminated the battlefield. The shining was followed by a barely audible humming akin to that of a low-powered laser. The Kruna all turned to see what may have very well

been the last thing they wanted to see; the Master Pendant hovering behind them. Before anyone could react, the gem bolted towards Elkon's corpse and latched itself onto his neck. His body began to rise high into the air and glow as it was simultaneously imbued with energy and dismantled before everyone's eyes. The chunks of Elkon's corpse morphed and reformed into a vicious, ghastly cloud of energy.

None of the Kruna would have been able to predict the horror show that soon became visible. The humanoid Revenant that emerged from the cloud bore a strong resemblance to Elkon, but instead of legs, he had large, segmented wings in pieces that seemed to be bound together by nothing but energy. The gunmetal gray body oozed pink and red energy in fluid-like wisps. Blood was a prominent feature, leaking from dozens of areas of his body, including the eye sockets of his head that were emptied and now filled only by bright blue orbs. Where his legs formerly were, his torso tapered down into an immobile and symmetrical eight-fingered claw.

The magnitude of power involved with the Master Pendant's reanimation and transformation of Elkon's body somehow pulled the sun up into view over the horizon, causing the appearance of an early morning blue and gold sunrise over the Twelfth Dimension. With a wave of his now clawed hands, the portal back to the Kruna's home dimension dissipated. An intermittent moaning could be heard coming from the reanimated corpse as it let loose a blood-curdling roar akin to that of a dying vampire and stared down the elemental wielders in preparation for combat.

"Well, Daisy, I guess you were on to something!" exclaimed Bowser.

"I'm not gonna say I told you so!" responded Daisy.

"That Master Pendant is definitely not just a piece of jewelry!" Marut hollered.

"No piece of jewelry glows and floats around doing what it just did to Elkon's corpse," Bowser added. "I don't care how high you are!"

"That gem has made a vessel out of Elkon's deceased body!" said Athelstan. "And it's cut off our way out of this dimension!"

"We'll make our own!" Andrew assured, sharing a look with Ramona. "But first, we have to get past this thing!"

"What an abomination," Ramona said, legs trembling.

"Yeah," Warra said under his breath. "I can't believe...he's this powerful."

"But we're powerful too!" asserted Andrew.

"C'mon everybody!" Daisy yelled with a fist raised to the heavens. "All of us!"

The earth wielder did not need to say anything more for her teammates to understand what she meant. The Kruna spread out along the staircase side of the Arena of Absolution. Warra drew his twin daggers, Marut pulled out his ninjato, Athelstan unlimbered his halberd, Bowser flared his claws, Ramona brandished her rapier, and Andrew unsheathed his twin forearm machetes. Daisy tightened her wrist weights as the Kruna all readied their elemental energies to stand against the Revenant.

Chapter XXXIX

Vanquish the Invincible Fiend! :

The Revenant wasted no time and started his assault on the seven Kruna by emitting an unblockable Omnidirectional Spatial Wave from his core. The elemental wielders were forced to take the hit and were knocked to the ground, though they didn't take much damage from it at all. It didn't seem like the attack was meant to do anything more than disrupt them. As they were getting back to their feet, The Revenant slashed an arm down that appeared to literally cut through space on its way towards the Kruna. All seven of them had enough time to leap to the sides of the Arena of Absolution to evade the attack that managed to distort the very fabric of space-time in a way that no one had ever seen before. Had the area through which that medium-range technique not restored itself moments after the Spatial Slice tore through, one could have made the argument, however incomprehensible, that those portions of space were actually somehow deleted.

Be grateful that this mortal body of mine is restricting my true capacities , Daisy remembered Elkon say in their battle. She glanced at the hovering corpse that was now preparing another attack. Like the burst fire mode of a projectile weapon, The Revenant fired off eight individual Spatial Projections in a staggered wave at the Kruna.

"Do NOT try to block any of these spatial attacks!" Daisy yelled as the reality distorting bursts rushed towards her teammates. She managed to evade the Spatial Projections along with Andrew, Marut, and Warra. Bowser, Athelstan, and Ramona were not so fortunate, taking the blasts head-on and getting knocked back down to the ground.

"Guys!" Daisy snapped.

"Can you say that earlier next time?!" Bowser griped, springing back up.

As Athelstan and Ramona got back to standing, another Omnidirectional Spatial Wave was let loose from The Revenant. The Kruna were all knocked down once more by the maneuver, their weapons falling out of their hands as they went to the ground. Several more Spatial Projections came darting towards the elemental wielders who could not get up fast enough to dodge. They took the hits and were thrown back further, almost to the point of getting knocked out of the arena and down the staircase.

"Aw, man!" Marut cried out on the ground. "I can't handle any more abuse from this mission! This is just too much!"

"No! It's not too much!" Daisy growled as she pressed herself up to her feet. "Get the hell up!" She ran over to the Kruna of Air and ripped him up off the ground, lifting him into the air.

"Okay, okay!" the green-clothed fighter hollered. He set his feet on the ground, prompting Daisy to let go of him. The other Kruna got back to standing and ran to retrieve their tools. The Revenant warped and disappeared from sight, became visible for less than a second somewhere else, then flew around the arena before vanishing again. The reanimated corpse continued this cycle of appearing and disappearing indefinitely, leading the Kruna to wonder what exactly he was doing.

"I can't tell – is he using some sort of illusion to not be seen or is he actually teleporting?" asked Marut after he went and grabbed his ninjato.

"No, he's definitely teleporting," said Bowser. "It's hard to tell because literally, one second he's somewhere in our vision, and then he's not. But the thing is, Elkon didn't have any shadow abilities when he was alive. And although the Master Pendant is providing power and energy for this corpse, I don't think the gem is actually using its own abilities but rather-"

"The Master Pendant must be taking advantage of Elkon's abilities through his now undead body," said Athelstan. "The moment Elkon's spirit left, the pendant seized the opportunity to steal his corpse and reanimate the body with its own power."

"But it's somehow also able to tap into Elkon's abilities," added Daisy. "When I fought Elkon, he had said that his mortal body was greatly limiting his spatial powers. So because this body's now dead, these spatial attacks are proving to be much more potent than before!"

"The Master Pendant took hold of Elkon's body and spatial capacities," said Bowser. "But other than that, everything else is coming from the gem itself. The energy, the reanimation, the will, the intentions; it's hard to imagine."

"Man, what is with that pendant?" Marut shouted in question.

The Revenant finally stopped his cycle of teleports and appeared over the center of the arena, releasing two dozen Energy Talons at the Kruna. Ramona put up a light barrier around her team to block the projectiles that ended up angling back towards The Revenant after bouncing off her shield. The Kruna of Light couldn't think to herself that she was able to deflect the attack because the Energy Talons seemed to be designed in a way that would cause them to redirect back to its user.

"Nice save, Ramona," said Warra.

"I don't think that technique of his is done," replied Ramona, keeping up her light barrier. As she had anticipated by the way the Energy Talons were tracking, The Revenant caught all of them – somehow, his wings. Even more startling was the velocity at which they traveled when he flapped his wings, a velocity that transferred into the Energy Talons to shatter Ramona's light barrier like glass on contact.

"...I barely...even saw...those energy blades," Marut thought aloud in shock.

"I don't think any of us did," said Athelstan, a spooked grin on his face.

"Let's hope he doesn't throw anything with those wings again," Warra said with wide eyes.

The Master Pendant let out a flash of light as The Revenant pulled his arms up high and generated two of Elkon's Quantum Spheres in his palms before throwing them at the Kruna. Athelstan leapt forward with his halberd and swatted one of the huge orbs away, Daisy doing the same on the other orb with a solid uppercut. Unfortunately for them, The Revenant was alternating arms, generating and throwing multiple Quantum Spheres by the second. Athelstan and Daisy continued to bat away the orbs while Marut concentrated a massive amount of air around his ninjato. The Kruna of Air let loose a monstrous gust with just enough force to push back the incoming Quantum Spheres. A chain reaction was created in which two of the spheres Marut blew at detonated upon contact with each other, causing all the other incoming spheres sent from The Revenant to fly into each ensuing explosion. The Revenant kept generating and throwing spheres, further lengthening the connecting detonations until he himself got caught in one once the explosions got too close to him.

"Awesome instincts, Marut!" Athelstan cheered.

"I wasn't expecting any of that to happen," replied Marut, prompting Bowser to facepalm himself.

Expecting a severely damaged Revenant to emerge from the billowing cloud of fumes, free energy, and spatial distortion, the Kruna were sorely disappointed to see that the reanimated corpse had only experienced minor trauma. They stared with frustrated faces as the space around The Revenant warped back to its previous state and everything settled.

"Seriously, what's with that pendant?!" Marut repeated. "Even with our power boost, it's taking all seven of us – including Daisy's Nova Form – to beat it now?"

"It's not like it was with Grekka!" said Warra. "The Master Pendant does not have to coexist – it has full control over its vessel, which must mean that it's able to utilize much more of its own power!"

Marut frowned. "Okay, I reiterate – how powerful is that pendant?!"

"Don't use words you can't spell," Bowser muttered.

The Revenant began his teleporting sequence again, vanishing and popping up at random angles as he flew around the arena. He cut off his movement at the far end of the arena opposite the Kruna and prepared a vastly more powerful version of Elkon's Quantum Beam.

"Everyone, move!" Daisy barked. She just barely got the command off as The Revenant fired beam. The Kruna split to the edges of the arena to avoid the massive wave of energy that ripped and pulsated through the air, a colossal beam of power that just barely missed one of the eight towers of the Final Fortress. The attack went on for almost ten whole seconds before it subsided, sounding like a metrorail rolling by. A huge explosion was visible in the distance several seconds later, but was too far away to be heard.

"We've got to stage an offensive now!" Daisy demanded. "Before he gets set for another attack!"

Almost immediately, Warra let a blast of pressurized water run through his twin daggers at The Revenant. Ramona followed up the Kruna of Water's attack with a Hyperbeam fortified through the use of her rapier, striking the reanimated corpse head-on. At the conclusion of the light wielder's attack, Bowser hurled a mighty fireball from his mouth to further pummel the undead body. Marut swiped his ninjato to create a cutting gust that sliced through the air and slashed into The Revenant. The whole time the Kruna were attacking, Athelstan was gathering stone from the surrounding environment and forming a large, dense mass above the arena. The brown-clothed fighter sent the heaping, voluminous mass of rock on its way towards The Revenant, smashing into the undead body and shattering on contact. The reanimated corpse didn't stay down for long, managing to burst free from the pile covering him by use of a short-range Omnidirectional Spatial Wave.

Daisy and Andrew dashed forward next, the Kruna of Earth grabbing hold of her shadow teammate as she ran and throwing him high up into the air. The fighter in black and purple created a fist of shadows as he fell towards the still reeling Revenant and slammed a punch into his torso, simultaneously allowing his shadows to flow free from around his arm to all over the reanimated corpse. The undead body began to stagger and jerk violently as it hovered in place.

"Finish him off, Daisy!" Andrew barked as he touched back down onto the ground.

"Gotcha!" Daisy yelled back, forming a Crystal Fist in her hand and dashing towards The Revenant. An audible smashing sound echoed throughout the top of the arena and the Final Fortress, triggered by Daisy's impeccably forceful blow into the waist of the reanimated corpse.

"Did we get him?" Ramona asked as all the Kruna regrouped at their side of the arena. The Revenant looked motionless, but continued to hover in place.

"He's not moving," Marut said. The moment he finished his statement though, The Revenant became animated again. His piercing neon blue eyes shined just as brightly as the pink glow coming from the Master Pendant.

"Are you sure?" Bowser asked the Kruna of Air.

"Damn, I think I short-armed that punch of mine," Daisy growled in self-criticism.

"It's alright; we'll get him this time," Andrew assured.

The Revenant let out a ghoulish and metallic roar in tandem with a stark increase in the glow of the Master Pendant. The skin of the reanimated corpse began to take on a more glossy appearance similar to the sheen of Nova Daisy's skin, coinciding with a subsequent increase in brightness and intensity of its wispy pink and red aura. Its torso then split open in the transverse plane, partially revealing its spherical black core. The undead form looked even more menacing than before.

"You know what," Bowser mumbled. "Nobody should say anything, because the moment somebody says something, that corpse just wants to be difficult!"

"Something tells me that that thing's just gotten more powerful!" said Athelstan.

"Your grammar is questionable, but yes!" said Ramona.

"Okay, either we didn't get a big boost in power at all, or something is seriously up with that Master Pendant," said Andrew.

"That's what I've been saying!" Marut hollered.

"And Rosalina didn't want to tell us anything about this gem, huh?" Bowser muttered in a sardonic tone. "Should we question her foresight?"

The Revenant started off his second wind by imploding himself and fully uncovering the Gravitational Singularity that made up his core from his torso. Within seconds, everything in the immediate vicinity became subject to the mighty pulling forces of the black orb that now existed where The Revenant formerly hovered. The Kruna all had to turn around and sprint in the direction opposite the pulling forces to ensure that they didn't get snatched up and crushed into oblivion. Compared to Elkon's Gravitational Singularity, The Revenant's core pulled less on the environment and more on space-time itself. Ramona turned her head around to look at what was going on behind her and saw a chaotic deformation of reality, encouraging her to make sure she ran as fast as she could.

"I don't think so!" Bowser called out, concentrating beams of plasma into his claws as he continued running. "If that black orb is the core of that undead body, even if it's pulling us in, that means that he's left himself wide open!"

"Yeah!" Marut exclaimed. With his ninjato, he generated powerful streaks of lightning as he kept up his pace to avoid getting smashed by the gravitational pull of the singularity.

"Fire it off!" Warra yelled, doing all he could to keep his pace while focusing on building up his water energy. Bowser and Marut both twisted around and backpedaled so that they could release their plasma and lightning at The Revenant's core. Warra spun around and released his built up energy as sonic waves, emitting them with the clang of the blades of his twin daggers. The sonics from the Kruna of Water rushed up behind Bowser and Marut's respective attacks, amplifying their forces. The Gravitational Singularity that was The Revenant's core was unprotected from the advanced forms of fire, air, and water that all converged and joined forces to pummel

the black orb. The simultaneous hits from the plasma, lightning, and sonics disrupted the pulling forces of the Gravitational Singularity and caused the black orb's attraction to stop working. After taking considerable damage from the attacks, the orb unraveled itself to reform back into The Revenant.

The Kruna stopped running and turned around to face their undead enemy, who was focusing his energy into an immensely concentrated spheroid. Unsure of what to expect from the technique, the elemental wielders stood their ground and waited. The Revenant fired off the spheroid at the Kruna, a slow-moving projectile compared to the previous attacks that came from the undead body. After lumbering through the air halfway towards the Kruna, the spheroid bubbled and burst open, spraying out energy in a fan-like wave. Every one of the elemental wielders was hit hard by the scattershot-like technique. Once again, they forced themselves to their feet after withstanding the vicious attack.

"Alright, that's it," Andrew muttered, springing forward in frustration. Clutching his forearm machetes with a suffocating grip, he dashed at their undead enemy.

"Hold on a minute!" Ramona shouted. "Andrew!"

As Andrew got close to The Revenant, the corpse raised his arm to try and rip into the incoming shadow wielder. Andrew made a swift step to the left to avoid the claw and made a backhanded slash with one of his blades out of a spin maneuver, slicing into a large chunk of The Revenant's flesh. Unfortunately for him, the corpse's other arm was already in motion. The Kruna of Shadow tried to twist out of the way in time, but The Revenant was too fast. Andrew endured a large gash on his left arm and began profusely bleeding as he spun out of the hit and backtracked to the Kruna's side of the field.

"Why the hell did you make that move?" Bowser snapped. "He can't feel pain! You should've expected something like that to happen!"

"I did," Andrew grunted, his arm covered in red. "Oh well."

"Oh well, he says," Ramona muttered, worried.

"Hey, at least he's one step closer to being destroyed," said Andrew.

"Well don't do that again!" Ramona yelled.

"Watch me," was Andrew's response, bolting forward once more.

Ramona grabbed hold of Andrew's undamaged arm and yanked him back before he could get too far away. "No, you're not doing that again! I swear, if I wasn't around you would've been dead years ago!"

The other Kruna looked at their irritated shadow teammate with perplexed and bewildered faces. Apparently, Andrew's maneuver caught the attention of the Master Pendant. The gem locked The Revenant's gaze onto the Kruna of Shadow almost exclusively. The reanimated corpse fired a quick bolt of energy from his claws at Andrew, but Ramona stepped in front of the shadow wielder to deflect the incoming blast with her rapier.

"Individual attacks are not going to work here, nor will defenses be able to do anything but stall," said Bowser.

"And we definitely can not go rushing headlong at this superpowered enemy!" added Ramona, intensely staring at Andrew.

"It seems like the corpse is getting more powerful with each passing moment," Warra said, taking note of the increasing frequency at which the wispy aura of The Revenant flowed.

Athelstan gripped his halberd tighter. "But we need one large attack to set us up for a combined assault." He focused the remaining stone in the Arena of Absolution into a giant cuboidal shape and, tapping deeper into his elemental powers, converted the mass into metal. Thrusting his halberd forward, the metal slammed into The Revenant. Somehow, the reanimated corpse actually *bent* into the wall of metal and burst through to the other side. A gaping hole was left in the metal heap as it sailed off into the distance.

"Well I guess that's not gonna do it," muttered Bowser.

"Just a second," said Athelstan, pulling his halberd back as if he were winding up a lawnmower. The metal mass that flew off into the

distance slowed to a stop in midair and flew backwards to return to the Arena of Absolution. At the same time, the Kruna of Stone contorted and warped the metal into a sizable spike. The sharpened projectile rocketed back towards the arena and impaled The Revenant in his back. The corpse let out a ghastly, horrific shriek as the metal speared through him clear to the other side and got stuck in his torso.

"Wow, that was pretty egregious, Athelstan," said Bowser.

"Hold on," replied the Kruna of Stone, motioning to Marut. The Kruna of air focused lightning through his ninjato once more and shot it at the metal protruding from The Revenant's torso. The metal amplified the lightning as the corpse was hammered by the shocking forces of Marut's attack. Warra let loose a blast of water to smother The Revenant, the water acting in tandem with the lightning and metal and causing even more damage to the reanimated cadaver. By the time Marut and Warra's attacks had run their course, The Revenant's form was a messy, sloppy, and charred body that appeared even more grotesque than when it had first formed.

"There you go," Athelstan finished.

"I think that just about did it," said Warra.

As if right on cue, the Master Pendant's glow intensified. The gem's light surrounded the corpse in its entirety, including the large, sharpened slab of metal that was stuck in The Revenant's torso, and initiated a violent transformation. The pulsating aura that surrounded The Revenant obscured his body as he morphed.

"Great, now what?" Bowser grumbled. "Is he really transforming again?"

"Okay, I'm really scared now!" Ramona whimpered.

"No, no, no!" Daisy shouted. "We do not get scared! We will win!"

A large form sprouted grand, majestic wings and burst forth from the opaque cloud of energy, coinciding with the deepening in saturation and brightness of the blue and gold sky. The energy followed The

Revenant up into the air above the Arena of Absolution, the reanimated corpse's form now imitating a fallen angel. As was the case before, the Master Pendant was strapped onto his neck, but gone were the claws and talons. He had regular hands now and his underside, instead of resembling a macabre bear trap, tapered down into a singular, wiry tail. The metal from Athelstan that was integrated into his body formed much of his upper back and arms. The Revenant was considerably larger than he was before the transformation, but the most apparent feature was a melded ball of black, brown, and white swirls that made up two-thirds of his torso. This multi-colored sphere was surrounded by four pairs of thin tendrils that acted as an external rib cage.

"WHAT THE HELL MAN?!" Bowser yelled. "How many times do we have to beat this thing?!"

"I wish Grekka was here," Warra thought aloud. "We're sorely missing his powers; this is supposed to be a team of eight, not seven. I feel like we're going to end up running out of energy before we can beat him!"

"Yeah man, we don't have the chill in our team!" Marut shouted, upset and distressed.

"We can't deny the fact that we're down one person," said Daisy. "But that doesn't mean that we can't overcome it. We don't have a lot of energy left now, so let's try to make what we have count!"

The Revenant in his Unholy Angel form opened up the third round of the battle with a growl even more metallic than his previous vocal outbursts. His neon blue eyes brightened as he created a bow made out of pure energy and aimed it at the Kruna. As he pulled back the "string" of the bow, seven separate energy arrows formed that spread out along the length of the bow limbs. A spatial shockwave was created upon the firing of the arrows. Warra and Ramona both snapped into action, sweeping their arms to create a wall of light that would stand behind a wall of water. The water barrier managed to slow the arrows down as they passed through so that the light barrier, even though it ended up getting broken, was able to block and destroy them.

The Revenant dispelled his energy bow and clenched his hands into fists, shaking in spasms as he created dozens of Quantum Spheres scattered around him. He thrust his arms forward to send the spheres on their way to the Kruna all at once, totaling about sixty in number. Bowser, Andrew, Ramona, Marut, and Warra all fired their elements at the incoming spheres, a magnificent scene of multi-colored and multi-textured momentary chaos forming in the air above the Final Fortress. The Revenant created another sixty Quantum Spheres and shot them, prompting the Kruna of Fire, Shadow, Light, Air, and Water to counter again. For a few moments, everythimg looked like one surreal and lawless blur as elements and explosions ruled the Arena of Absolution.

"The Master Pendant has shuffled a ludicrous amount of power into that body," Warra said. "But now, he looks really unstable!"

"So if we beat him again, we shouldn't expect him to reform into something worse," Athelstan concluded.

"But he's still so powerful!" Ramona cried out. "How are we supposed to take him down?"

Daisy raised her arms out from her sides as the atmosphere around the arena calmed down. The Master Pendant was not content with allowing the action to subside and commanded The Revenant to produce eighty-eight Energy Talons, sharper and larger than the ones the corpse had used in his previous form. Once more, Bowser, Andrew, Ramona, Marut, and Warra all countered the incoming attacks with blasts of their elements, and once more, loud, obnoxious chaos consumed the arena. Daisy took the surrounding earth and commanded it to fly up into the sky through the all-encompassing cloud of energy and elementals as one slab that almost matched the width of the arena. She intended to trap The Revenant in the same casing she had trapped Elkon in before, but the reanimated corpse miraculously repelled the earth elementals with a well-timed Omnidirectional Spatial Wave. The attack was powered up in his Unholy Angel form much like every other one of the corpse's techniques, the enhanced force and range of the move flattening the Kruna and causing the Final Fortress itself to rumble and convulse. As they returned to their feet, the Kruna's ears were bombarded by another one of The Revenant's horrid howls.

"We've got to do something!" Warra exclaimed. "This can't be dragged out any longer!"

"Yeah," said Athelstan. "He's getting stronger, and we're getting weaker!"

"If we're not careful, he's going to level this fortress," Andrew said. "And that means, we'll literally get crushed!"

The Revenant's external rib cage split open down the middle like a pair of claws opening their grip to expose the orb that took up two-thirds of his torso. The bioluminescence of the orb strengthened and magnified as the reanimated corpse prepared to unleash a potentially devastating attack.

It was then that Bowser caught on to something. "Of course," he whispered, getting in position to fire a Tavado blast. "Attack his torso! His core is the weak spot! Now while we have the chance!"

The fiery torpedoes of the Tavado blast rocketed in their usual haphazard fashion towards their target – The Revenant's core. The attack would have struck home had The Revenant not curled in his colossal wings to block the blast.

"That is a novel idea," Warra began. "But that right there probably wasn't the chance we needed."

The Revenant retracted his wings and continued preparing his move, his core growing more active and generating even more energy. The Master Pendant just kept shuttling energy into The Revenant as if the gem's reserves were inexhaustible.

"How do we beat him? How do we beat him? How do we beat him?" Marut rambled with great speed over and over.

"We gotta take him out now!" Bowser hollered. "It's all or nothing!"

"Then let's give it our all!" Daisy yelled. "We all have to release our energies at once!"

The Revenant's core flickered before expanding outwards from his torso. The black, brown, and white orb began revolving in place. It

looked like a tumorous protrusion from the undead corpse.

"No way," Marut murmured. "Is it actually going to *fire its own core* at us?!"

"The same core that functioned as a miniature black hole moments ago?" asked Athelstan.

"Wait, this is exactly what we need to happen!" exclaimed Daisy.

"What do you mean?" asked Ramona.

"No time!" Daisy barked. "Quickly! All of us must stand as one!"

A sound that could not be described as anything other than a distorted engine echoed from The Revenant's mounting attack, the Quantum Flash. The energies built up within the undead body's core exceeded even Deyanira's power. As per Daisy's command, the seven Kruna gathered and stood together, side by side in a semi-circle. They held out their arms and released their elemental energies in unison with one another. A large spheroid of power formed in front of them, collecting, holding, and combining each of their elemental energies. Within moments, the Kruna had a mass of power prepared to rival The Revenant's Quantum Flash.

"This is it!" shouted Daisy. "It's either him or us!"

Content with the power of the Quantum Flash, the Master Pendant allowed it to rip out from The Revenant's torso. The Kruna sent forth their beam of elemental energies to meet the incoming blast. When the two columns of power clashed, reality seemed to posterize. The Kruna held up their blast and withstood the energies from The Revenant, the power struggle generating crashing, pulsating noise and taking up much of the space of the Arena of Absolution. The Revenant's blast was beyond formidable, but these Kruna fought on.

"Keep it up everyone!" Andrew hollered.

"I...can't!" Ramona wailed.

"Too strong!" Athelstan grunted.

The Revenant's beam started to overtake the Kruna's blast. Although it couldn't be seen past the colossal clashing of the energies, the Master Pendant was glowing profusely.

"No!" Daisy screamed, the rasp in her voice amplified by her stark rise in volume. "We can overcome him! We can destroy the core now and end it all! Just focus!"

The Quantum Flash kept inching closer and closer to the Kruna, eating away at their Elemental Wave. Soon, The Revenant had pressed to within twenty feet of the fighters.

"C'MON!" Daisy echoed across the entire roof of the fortress. Answering her call, her teammates put more force behind the blast and managed to not only stop the advancement of the Quantum Flash but reverse it completely. Their blast thickened in circumference and started to ease closer to The Revenant. However, the Master Pendant would not allow the Kruna the opportunity to overtake the Quantum Flash so easily. The gem shuttled even more power through to The Revenant to further intensify the blast and push back the Kruna's energy.

"Damn it!" Warra cried out. "This hurts!"

"So much!" Athelstan hollered.

"I don't think we got it you guys!" Marut shouted, dropping to one knee.

"I thought we had more than this!" Andrew screamed.

Once more, The Revenant's wave began to overpower the Kruna's attack. They could feel themselves faltering underneath the immensity of the Quantum Flash. Little by little, The Revenant's attack worked its way towards the Kruna and looked ready to overwhelm them. If they didn't do anything quick, they would succumb to the might of The Revenant and be fatally engulfed by his core.

Just when the Kruna needed it the most, Daisy pressed her power and rallied the team. "We...didn't come all this way..." she growled.

"Just to LOSE!" With a fierce battle cry, she pumped more of her energy through the Kruna's blast. Her energy surged through their Elemental Wave and forced back the Quantum Flash, giving the team the momentum and, consequently, the golden opportunity that they *had* to take.

"WE'VE GOT TO BRING IT ALL OUT!" Daisy yelled. "NOW!"

Warra, Athelstan, Ramona, Bowser, Marut, Andrew, Daisy; all of them let loose everything they could, every ounce of power they had, and forced it into the Elemental Wave. The Master Pendant held up its output, not allowing The Revenant to let up on his attack. This was it; all of their efforts, all of their battles, all the obstacles that they had overcome as a team, all added up and came down to this one singular moment that would decide whether their entire mission was a success or a failure. Adrenaline rushing through their burning, aching bodies, they pressed on against The Revenant. The gem siphoned more of its power to fortify the Quantum Flash, but the Kruna stayed strong. And then, fate was decided.

The Kruna gave it their all against the staggering strength of their enemy...and it paid off. The combined might of their elemental powers pushed through, overtaking the Quantum Flash and The Revenant's core. Their energy surged through the undead corpse and ravaged both his core and his body, and there was nothing the Master Pendant could do in time to stop it. Virtually depleted, the Kruna cut off their Elemental Wave. The Revenant's core, damaged, fractured, and leaking energy, began to shine in near-blinding brilliance, lighting up the sky above the Final Fortress. The reanimated corpse let out one final shriek before it started to crackle and crumble into wispy pieces as its core fell apart and as its body started booming and snapping like a collection of firecrackers. Marut could have sworn he heard The Revenant moan "Kruna" for much of the duration of the corpse's destruction, but wasn't too sure of it. One final explosion from the core shook the Master Pendant free and hurled it far off into the distance. The Revenant continued its decimation into oblivion until no trace of the body was left behind.

Chapter XL

Guardians of the Elements :

The hazy sky over the Final Fortress cleared, allowing the gold and blue sunrise to slip its rays of light over the Arena of Absolution. The angle of the sun caused large, long shadows to be cast by the towers and constructs of the fortress as well as the Kruna themselves. No trace of The Revenant or the Master Pendant could be sensed in any way. Calm tranquility took over the atmosphere, an ambience that felt unnatural after having to face daunting trials and numerous tribulations for so long.

"Are you sure you don't want me to use my healing water on your gash?" Warra asked Andrew. "I've got enough for one more use left."

"It's fine," the Kruna of Shadow replied. "I don't need it."

"Judging by the color of your arm from the wound down, I beg to differ," said Ramona.

Andrew didn't give any response, instead staring blankly into the sun hovering just behind the mountainous horizon. "I'll deal," he finally said.

Ramona stared at the shadow wielder, worried and confused. She let out a deep breath, but said nothing more.

"So what do you think now, Daisy?" asked Andrew, changing the subject. "You think it's over?"

"Yeah, definitely," the Kruna of Earth said, gasping. Her teammates turned around to look at her.

"Hey, you alright there?" asked Bowser.

"So much pain...this mission, my body," Daisy tried to get out. "In Nova Form for too long...so tired..." Now that the mission was over,

it seemed that every bit of damage and physical trauma that she had accumulated from the trip began to catch up with her; and it was showing. Her eyes hazily fell half-closed as she started to topple over, fading out of her Nova state and back into her base form. Expecting to come crashing down on the floor, she was surprised when she made a soft landing with minimal drop. She had landed on top of Warra's back, who stepped over and crouched down to catch her.

"I got you," said the Kruna of Water.

"Warra," Daisy mumbled. "You don't have to carry me, I can-"

"Hey, this whole mission, you carried us," replied Warra. "So just rest. Can you relax for once?"

Daisy took a quick breath. She then smiled and relaxed, allowing Warra to stand up with her draped across his back and shoulders.

"Hah! Now that our mission's finished, you're finished!" Athelstan said to Daisy. Everyone started laughing with one another. It seemed as if the ominous cloud that had hovered over them for the entirety of their quest had finally lifted. The Kruna were all in good spirits, enjoying the company of each other.

Marut sighed with a slight grin. "So, how about we get back to our world?"

"I think we have just enough in us to create one portal," said Andrew. "What do you say, Ramona?"

"I should have enough," Ramona replied with a smile. "For just one." The two Kruna of Light and Shadow stood together to combine the remainder of their energy.

"Where exactly are we bridging to?" asked Andrew.

"Anywhere but here," said Athelstan.

"How about the Mushroom Kingdom?" Daisy murmured. "Or, just outside of Mushroom Kingdom, if you don't mind. Doesn't matter as long as we're close by."

"Well, you look comfortable," Bowser said to Daisy. The Kruna of Earth looked limp as she lay across Warra's back.

"I don't think I need to tell her to not get used to this," Warra remarked in a lighthearted tone.

As the group laughed altogether, Ramona and Andrew focused and made the necessary bridge to the outskirts of the Mushroom Kingdom. They cast the portal where Elkon had cast his before The Revenant dissolved it; out above the Arena of Absolution on the opposite side of the staircase.

"Alright you guys," said Andrew. "This portal is set to disband in four minutes, give or take. So by the time we return to our realm, the gateway to this world will be closed off, leaving this place deserted."

"We're going to have to take care of those portals Elkon had set at the Stone Shrine and south of the Light Shrine and Shadow Shrine," Ramona said. "And whatever other portals Elkon had created that we don't know about, too."

"Right, well, we'll be sure to take care of it as soon as we can," Andrew said. "That's one thing for certain that needs to be done sooner rather than later. But for now, let's get outta here already."

"Yeah," Marut replied. "The Twelfth Dimension's nice and all, but I think we've spent enough time here."

"What is it, Luigi?" asked Mario. It was nighttime and the two fire and air wielders were lounging outside in the backyard terrace of Peach's Castle while Toad and the princess herself finished up some grilling. Toadette and Toadsworth sat nearer to the great bonfire in the central area. It had been a nice, quaint cookout until Luigi got spooked.

"There's seven powers that just appeared out of nowhere!" Luigi sputtered, his eyes perturbed. "This feels like trouble; they're all large!"

Mario's face lit up as he gasped in sudden awareness. "Now I sense

them too!"

"I can't make out who they are!" Luigi exclaimed. "It's strange, because I feel like two of those I've sensed before, but they're so..."

"Different," Mario finished. "Daisy and Bowser both I can make out, but at the same time, their aura has almost completely changed!"

"What if it's not them?" Luigi thought aloud. "What if they're new threats trying to pose as them?"

"It can't be them!" Mario refuted. "It just can't! It wouldn't make any sense!"

"The world just loves throwing evil forces our way, doesn't it?" said Luigi.

"Hold on; don't jump to conclusions so quickly!" Toad remarked. "What if it's just seven really good dudes?"

"How often does that happen around here?" Luigi asked with sarcasm.

"I still don't know how you guys are able to do that 'feeling' thing," said Peach.

"Nature Sense," Mario replied. "It's one of the first things an elemental wielder has to learn; probably one of the most crucial."

"Otherwise, we'd be liable to sneak attacks," added Luigi, clearing his throat while gesturing to the princess.

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" asked Peach.

"Uh – no time! We gotta check this out!" Luigi rambled as he bolted off around the side of the castle. Mario followed his brother stride for stride, laughing.

"Wait for me!" Peach wailed, following the two elemental wielders.

"Oh, this I gotta see," Toad said under his breath with a sly grin. He ran to follow Peach and the Mario Brothers. Toadette and

Toadsworth opted to stay behind and look after the grill and the bonfire.

"Oh, you know what," Toadsworth began. "I meant to mention this before and I really should've told them before they left, but I came across Daisy and Bowser both when I was on one of my expeditions."

"Really?!" asked Toadette.

"Oh yes!" said Toadsworth. "The both of them and a handful of others were on some sort of quest together. I do believe I saw Rosalina there too. What they were doing there, I'm not sure of, really. I didn't really see it fit to go rearing my head into their business – well, I was a little preoccupied with my own! But that's beside the point!"

Toadette paused for a couple seconds. "Why didn't you bring it up to us all before?"

"I am so terribly sorry," Toadsworth replied. "Please pardon my old age!"

Blown nearly two miles away from the Final Fortress through the air and still sailing, the Master Pendant tapped into its expansive reservoir of power and stopped its travel in a near instant. The gem hung in the air as if it had frozen itself in space. It hovered there for a few moments, the environment silent. The Master Pendant soon began vibrating in the air, convulsing as if it knew how to feel rage. Energy leaked from the gem in violent bursts, its hissing and moaning echoing throughout the landscape.

Then, it flew. It flew with purpose and speed. Great speed. It didn't take long for the Master Pendant to rocket in the opposite direction it had been initially propelled in. The Master Pendant was back at the Final Fortress in mere minutes. It floated up the walls to the top of the building to survey the fortress roof and the Arena of Absolution, but it found nobody there. The battle site looked like it had literally just been abandoned. Rather than lifeforms, bodies, or anything else

sentient, it saw a weakening portal that looked ready to dissipate.

Using some of its power, the Master Pendant connected with the portal and forced it wide open before it had a chance to close.

Kruna...

With a jolt of energy, it altered the portal so that it would bridge to a different destination, but kept the dimension the same; the Kruna's home dimension.

Celebrate your triumph, savor your victory... You mortals are always so quick to believe that you have won...

The Master Pendant tapped into its power once more and caused the portal to shrink and dissipate...but not before flying into the portal itself.

One day...you will all...suffer...again...

Underneath the moonlit sky, the Kruna reached and entered the clearing that was The Forest Meadow. It was the exact place where Daisy and Bowser both started their destined mission. They had been through so much that it felt like months since the two of them sought out Rosalina in this very location that one, fateful night. To their surprise, Rosalina was waiting for them.

The Elder of the Cosmos gestured to each of the Kruna in turn as they huddled up to stand before her. "Mighty Boulder. Aqua Drifter. Aerial Assailant. Shadow Shifter. Guiding Light. Flame Titan. Earthen Spirit..." She paused and looked to the sky. "And...Winter Warrior..." She redirected her gaze to the elemental wielders before her, Warra still carrying an utterly worn out Daisy on his back. "You've gone through quite the adventure, haven't you?"

"Huh..." Bowser started to say before his voice trailed off.

"Why'd you refer to us as that?" asked Athelstan.

"Yeah, I'm a little confused too," said Marut.

"Why, they're your honorary titles," Rosalina said. "Titles that will appear in the Cosmic Archives once our chroniclers are finished recording your great feats. But 'Kruna' will by far be the most consistent and widely used. Even though these titles are noble elemental monikers, they're literary epithets, per say, not quite carrying the same magnitude or amount of significance that 'Kruna' does."

"But you referred to Daisy and I as Earthen Spirit and Flame Titan *before* we even started on the quest!" Bowser pointed out.

"I know," the Cosmic Queen replied.

Bowser blinked multiple times in succession. "But why? How?!"

"I think that's for you to figure out for yourselves," Rosalina replied.

Bowser stared at Rosalina with a blank expression. *There's no way she could have foretold the outcome of our events,* he thought. *I refuse to believe that! Unless she's going to use 'destiny' as an excuse again...or 'fate' rather... I can't tell the difference between the two! She had to have just made a lucky guess, I think...*

"A remarkable job done by all of you," Rosalina said in praise. "The world owes you a great debt."

"The world owes us nothing," said Daisy. "We're just fulfilling our duty."

"So what's next, Grand Elder?" asked Warra.

"That's a good question," said Marut. "What are we going to do now?"

"I don't think you need any more instruction from me," Rosalina replied. "You have all come into your own. I can provide assistance, but your direction and course of action is all in your hands."

Ramona turned to Daisy. "If it's alright with you guys, could we all rest around here and recuperate for a little while?"

"Sure," the Kruna of Earth replied.

"You can all stay at my palace," added Bowser.

"It's greatly appreciated," said Ramona. "Really."

"We won't stay for long," stated Andrew. "Ramona and I have to close off those portals and make sure travel to the Twelfth Dimension is cut off."

"Already taken care of," Rosalina assured. "Some of our associates up at the Comet Observatory have just been dispatched to the sites of those portals that were left open so that they may close them and effectively cut off the Twelfth Dimension from this world. So rest and allow yourself the opportunity to recover. Don't rush yourselves; that was a difficult and trying journey that is going to require some time to recover from."

"Well, it would be nice..." Bowser began. "If you could get my truck and Daisy's bike back!"

"We'll be sure to get them back," Ramona replied with a smile. "At the Great Valley was where we left them."

"Inadvertently, of course," added Andrew. "I think we all remember how things turned out there; I mean, it was only within the past twenty-four hours!"

"We need to go over what happened with Elkon in regards to what he told me," said Daisy. "We can draw from that what we're going to do next."

"You can relay all the information to me at a later date," said Rosalina. "When you've figured out what you want to do, then let me know. There's no rush at this present time." Daisy, Bowser, and Warra nodded in response.

"Hey, what about the Stone Shrine and the surrounding region?" asked Athelstan.

"We have officials dispatched there as well, doing what they can to try and return the area to its previous state," Rosalina said. "They've done a good job removing the dimensional rifts there and returning stability to the entire desert. The area is still a part of our world, so

we still have access to it, but it appears that the Dimension of the Lost is permanently fused to the region. There's no getting around that, unfortunately."

"What made you ask, Athelstan?" questioned Warra.

"I was thinking I could try revisiting the Stone Shrine," the Kruna of Stone replied. "These Pendants of Power sound intriguing, and I remember Elkon talking about ancient scriptures there. Maybe I could find out some more information on them if I go back there and decode those records."

"Hah! 'Muscle nerd,' " Marut joked. "Or maybe, 'Swole Nerd.' "

"Athelstan," Rosalina began. "You're more than welcome to come with me to the Comet Observatory. The Pendants of Power have all been extensively archived up there."

"Really?" asked Athelstan. "Are you sure that's okay?"

"Positive," the Elder of the Cosmos replied. "The archives down here on this planet were long ago purged of all information regarding the Pendants of Power. It was necessary in order to prevent an...apocalyptic event. Not even the Air Shrine has retained any records on the pendants."

"What's the story behind that?" the brown-clothed fighter asked.

"It's extensive, but you'll find that out soon enough, Athelstan," said Rosalina. "Whenever you're ready, of course."

"Of course," Athelstan repeated in confirmation.

Rosalina nodded. "It's time for me to return to the Comet Observatory. Know that I am available for assistance should you ever need it."

"Thank you, Grand Elder," said Ramona with a bow.

Andrew bowed as well. "You have all our thanks for everything."

"You've all ran the gauntlet," said Rosalina. "Wear the mantle of

Kruna with valor and virtue, and may the stars continue to shine down on you." With that, Rosalina teleported out of The Forest Meadow.

Daisy slipped herself off of Warra to stand on her own two feet. "Thanks, buddy."

"Not a problem," replied the blue-clothed fighter. "For someone as physically strong as you, you're relatively light."

"It's getting pretty late, so how about we go to my palace now?" Bowser suggested. "It's about a half mile or so from here."

"Good idea," said Marut. "I'm so tired right now."

"We all are," said Athelstan.

"And hungry!" Daisy shouted.

"It's the middle of the night – can you not?" asked Warra, referring to the Kruna of Earth's volume. Ramona, Athelstan, Marut, and Daisy all started laughing.

Bowser chuckled as he waved his hand and started walking down one of the paths that the meadow branched out to. "Alright. This way."

The other Kruna followed Bowser down the path; all of them except for Andrew, who stood facing away from the team, staring off into the dark forest illuminated by the lunar light. Warra stopped walking and turned back when he noticed Andrew was not following the group. The shadow wielder seemed lost in thought, disconnected from the world.

Daisy stopped and turned around to look at the water wielder. "Let's go, Warra!" she yelled back.

"You guys go on," Warra replied, using his head to gesture to the Kruna of Shadow.

"Oh, right," said Daisy, suddenly hushed. She turned back to the group as they continued walking down the path. In a handful of

moments, they were out of sight. Only Warra and Andrew remained in The Forest Meadow. Andrew was aware that the Kruna of Water was still there, but didn't acknowledge him and expected him to leave. Warra did not, and Andrew still said nothing.

"What you did back there, in the Twelfth Dimension," said Warra, breaking the somber silence. "That was utterly foolish. But, it was brave, nonetheless."

"I don't need the applause," grumbled Andrew. "I tried something, and it didn't work. There's nothing else to it."

"You shouldn't have needed to try it to come to the conclusion that that move wasn't going to work," said Warra.

"Well, I'm not the kind of person to sit around and wait."

Warra smiled. "I can safely say that that's more apparent now than it was before."

Andrew didn't turn to face the Kruna of Water. "I've been meaning to ask you," the shadow wielder started to say before pausing for a moment as if he were mulling something over. "When I cast the veil of shadow for you to peer into on our way to the Shadow Shrine, what did you see?"

Warra's smile faded into a slight frown. It took him a while to respond, showing apprehension towards revealing such information that he deemed very personal to him, but he felt compelled to tell the Kruna of Shadow regardless. "Someone very precious to me. Someone very precious who I let down, who I wasn't there for and was taken away from me far too soon."

Andrew let his eyes drift to a close as he took a chasm of a breath.

"I should've been there to prevent it," Warra continued. "But I wasn't. And I did not know until it was far too late. It's because of her that I have sworn to never let anyone else down. I put my life on that. I have too."

A pause followed, before Andrew replied with, "I see."

"I think you need this last bit of healing water," Warra told Andrew, taking out his bottle and releasing the last of the special water on Andrew's gaping gash. "Then again, you may be better off with those Mushrooms Daisy was talking about if they're as good as she said they are."

"...Thanks," murmured the Kruna of Shadow. "You go on ahead. I'll catch up."

Warra's smile returned. "Your call." He turned around and started walking in the direction of the rest of the Kruna. "Just don't stay out here too late."

Soon, Andrew was alone in The Forest Meadow with no one to keep him company but his own self. *At least my arm's not burning as much as before,* he thought. *B ut this is more likely than not going to leave a scar. Another scar. My whole body's practically a scar.* He sighed once more, embracing the cool, crisp air of the night. *I should've been able to do more!* He felt so trapped, all of a sudden feeling spiteful and enraged at himself. The darkness was the only thing keeping him calm. The darkness was the only thing that kept him from gutting himself in fury with his own elemental powers.

But he kept all his feelings bottled up inside of him, showing nothing but a poker face...except for the two stray tears, one for each eye, that leaked from his psyche. *That Master Pendant should have gone after me!* He roared in his mind. *Not Grekka!* All the passion that began swelling within, he suppressed. He was good at it. He would not have been able to hold it down for so many years of his young life if he was not.

He was also good at aggravating that mass of repression. Adding to his self-torment, Andrew cast a wall of shadow a few feet in front of him and focused his stare deep into the pure darkness. He allowed himself to see everything that went through his head.

Chapter XLI

Emergence of New Legends :

"They're close by!" Mario yelled as he, Luigi, Peach, and Toad ran through the Mushroom Kingdom en route to the city limits. Luigi flared spheres of gusts in his hands, and Mario had two fireballs at ready. With their hammers strapped to their backs, the two were prepared to take down whoever the potential threats were that they were about to ambush. A few hundred yards down the street and the lit lampposts, the two plumbers noticed a marked spike in the energy signatures that they were tracking.

"Around the corner!" Luigi exclaimed, allowing sparks of lightning to crackle in his orbs of air. Peach and Toad followed as Mario and Luigi cut around a wall and jumped forth to confront their potential threats.

"Freeze!" Mario hollered.

"What the-" Athelstan sputtered. "A fire wielder wearing blue?! An air wielder wearing blue?! Daisy, this kingdom you live in is bizarre already!" Warra shrugged. Ramona and Marut both giggled.

"Daisy! Look out!" Luigi screamed. "Bowser's right behind you!"

Daisy shared a blank look with the Koopa King as he walked forward; Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Toad all waiting with bated breath to see what would happen next...except nothing happened. Daisy and Bowser broke out in laughter, followed by the rest of the Kruna. Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Toad all fell over on their face in shock.

"That fire wielder said 'freeze!' " Marut shouted.

"Hey, did you get 'burned' by an ice wielder on your way here?" Athelstan asked. The Kruna started laughing even harder as the Mario Brothers, Princess Toadstool, and Toad got back to their feet.

"Okay!" Luigi called out, as irritated as he was confused. "Anybody

wanna start explaining something?!"

"Stop laughing!" demanded Mario.

"I'm gonna be loud too!" Toad cried out, waving his arms.

"Chill out, dudes," said Marut. "We're just messin' around!"

"Yeah," Daisy assured. "Nobody here's enemies! We're all friends!"

"WHAT?!" Mario and Luigi yelled in unison, eyeing Bowser.

"Friends of yours, friends of theirs, friends of ours, friends of fair!" Marut sang.

"Hey bro," Luigi said, eyes wide. "I'm gonna stop spiking my drinks from now on..."

Mario blinked repeatedly, trying to clear his eyes. "I think you've been spiking *my* drinks!"

"I wish I could say that," said Luigi.

"Daisy," Peach began. "Why are you covered in bruises and scabs?"

"Why are you *all* covered in bruises and scabs?" asked Luigi.

"And why is Bowser here?" Mario frantically added, his face scrunched.

"Why are *you* here?" Bowser casually questioned.

"I asked first!" Mario exclaimed.

"Look pal, I'm not here to start up anything," said Bowser. "We're just passing through."

"Yeah," said Marut. "We're really not trying to cause any trouble. We're too tired!"

"And hungry," Daisy added.

"Alright, we got that already Daisy!" Bowser remarked. "There's

plenty to eat at the palace!"

Toad stared at Marut with a blank expression. "Are you Link?"

"What?" the Kruna of Air responded. "Who's Link?"

"So do we attack Bowser or not?" asked Luigi, getting restless.

"No, you don't!" Daisy responded, mildly annoyed. "We just covered this!"

"I can speak for myself, thank you," said Bowser, calm in his tone. He directed his attention to Mario. "We didn't expect to run into you guys at all. We're all on our way to my palace. You're welcome to come join us if you like."

"Close your mouth, bro!" Mario snapped at Luigi, whose jaw was hanging open. Toad walked over to Luigi and pushed his mouth shut.

Bowser seems so...different... Peach thought. *Almost, tranquil in a way. I don't think I recall ever seeing him like this before.*

Bowser noticed Peach's eyes locked on him. *Why is she staring at me?* he grumbled in his mind.

"Well, what do you think, Mario?" Luigi asked. "These guys don't look like they're threats."

"Are you sure?" asked Toad. "They don't have signs saying 'we're not threats' strapped to themselves for all to see."

"Well, if Daisy's with them, isn't that a metaphorical sign?" Luigi reasoned.

Athelstan grabbed one of the puffballs of Marut's hat while gesturing with his free hand at Ramona. "If you think an eighteen year-old boy in a double tassel hat and a nineteen year-old girl with shaggy hair is threatening, please don't tell us what your nightmares are like!" All the Kruna burst out laughing again, making the otherwise quaint nighttime atmosphere seem raucous.

"Alright, I think we've been on vacation too long, bro," Luigi muttered.

"Offer's still on the table, Mario," said Bowser.

"Man, you can't write this stuff, can you Luigi?" Mario sputtered out.

"Who are these people anyways?" asked Luigi.

"And how did you and Bowser get so powerful, Daisy?" asked Peach.

"Seriously, what have you been up to, Sarasa?" Mario asked.

"Wait a minute..." Marut muttered, his eyes narrowing as he focused on Mario and Luigi. "Didn't we see you two in Delight City?"

"No no no – those were doppelgangers!" Daisy corrected, putting her hands up. Mario and Luigi looked at the Kruna of Earth, dumbstruck.

Toad stared at Athelstan, similar to the way he had stared at Marut. "Are you Ryu?"

Athelstan raised an eyebrow. "What? My clothes are brown!"

Toad tilted his head to the side. "Dingy Ryu?"

"This is Athelstan," said Daisy, gesturing to each of her teammates in turn. "Warra. Marut. Ramona."

"And Andrew is not with us at the moment, but he'll be catching up later," Warra added.

Now Toad started laughing without any apparent cause.

"What?" Marut asked. "What's so funny?"

"He's probably laughing at us for laughing at them," said Athelstan.

"Then we should laugh at him for laughing at us for laughing at him," said Marut.

"That's what you carry around as weapons?" Toad asked with a cocked eyebrow, referring to the various implements the Kruna had attached to them. "I'm wondering how you managed to get by with those!"

Marut unsheathed his ninjato and started eyeing it down from different angles. "Um... Yeah...? What's wrong with them?"

"So basic!" hollered Toad. "How do you expect to get anywhere with those generic tools?"

The Kruna of Air shrugged. "I dunno. It's what we had with us, so we made use of them!"

Toad crossed his arms. "Well, when you get a chance, I want you all to come find me in Peach's Castle! My armory has personally handcrafted tools that are element specific, allowing for even better elemental control and less energy wasting! At first glance, I could probably upgrade some of yours too!" He paused, changing the tone of his voice. "Unless of course, you actually *like* using those things you're carrying now."

Athelstan laughed. "Quite a bold statement coming from such a little...mushroom man?"

"Don't mind him," said Luigi. "That's Toad. He's proven to be a very effective engineer, blacksmith, and carpenter."

"I'm getting better by the day!" Toad exclaimed. "Upgrading your stuff's child's play!"

"He's a very enthusiastic character," said Peach. "Excitable, almost like a very young kid."

"And competitive, I might add," Mario remarked. "Definitely competitive, but he always lends a helping hand without even being asked!"

"I welcome you all to the Mushroom Kingdom," Peach said with a bow. "I am Princess Toadstool-"

"But we just call her Peach," Toad said, cutting her off.

Peach paused for a brief moment, then continued. "As I was saying... Yes, that is my more colloquial name. I have dominion over the lands here."

"He's Mario," said Luigi.

"And he's Luigi," said Mario.

"I've heard of you guys," said Warra. "You're quite the name across the west continent; I'd say the whole western half of the world!"

"Is it true that you two are able to harness cosmic energy?" Ramona asked with beaming eyes.

"Yup!" Luigi replied. "Only for short bursts, but we can do it! It's a pretty hard feat but man, it's a rush! It's like we're god-tier! I don't like turning into a living rainbow, but it's otherwise awesome!"

"Oh yeah, you're the guys who beat Cackletta," added Athelstan. "And Antasma, Fawful, Count Bleck, Dimentio; quite the track record. The hell were you doing during all that, Daisy?"

"I don't know," said Daisy. "They never told me about any of those adventures until days – sometimes weeks...or months – after the fact! Truth be told, a couple of those I never even heard of!"

Luigi started sputtering. "Well you see, um..."

"Shut it!" Daisy grunted out. Luigi's posture sank.

"Well, you never say where *you're* going!" Mario argued.

"Have you ever bothered to ask?" Daisy snapped.

Luigi raised a hand and opened his mouth to say something, but couldn't come up with a viable answer. "Define, 'ask?' "

"So where *have* you been all this time?!" Mario questioned, palms out as if he were pleading for answers.

Daisy placed her hands on her upper arms as she tended to do from time to time and cocked a smirk. "So now, all of a sudden, you want

to know? I guess you'll find out sooner or later."

"I told you she was mad about not going on adventures with you guys," said Toad.

Daisy laughed a little. "Ah, I'm just messin' with ya. No hard feelings. You've got your stuff to deal with. I get it. So are you coming with us to Bowser's Palace or not?"

Once again, Mario and Luigi were flummoxed and left without words. Strangely, Peach showed no reaction. If anything, the princess actually had a faint smile. Toad just stood there, bobbing his arms and head back and forth.

Somehow, Daisy got Bowser to...not be Bowser? Mario mused. *That can't be Bowser! After all that has happened, how can I believe that the Koopa King is actually not trying to attack us? But then again, maybe he isn't! He looks so...serene, without a hint of disturbance or malice in his demeanor...*

Oh man, I wonder what Mario must be thinking right about now, Luigi pondered, peering at his brother. *Bowser doesn't really seem like he's hostile at all. I mean, Daisy's with him, and those other guys are with him, and he hasn't tried to fry the whole block yet. Although we are practically at point-blank range right now for one of his ferocious attacks...* He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand and looked into the sky. *Oh, I'm as nervous as I am confused!*

The other Kruna were not sure what to think of the event, being oblivious to the heated rivalry between Mario and Bowser and what that tension meant for both sides for so long. Their ignorance of the matter was attributed to Bowser's aggression being almost exclusively directed towards the Mushroom Kingdom. As such, the grudge between the Koopa Clan and the Mushroom Kingdom was much lesser known, not garnering the same kind of attention that the other beings who were more widespread with their hostility did.

"Well?" Bowser asked, breaking the silence.

Mario looked at his brother. "Luigi?"

The air wielder in overalls shrugged. "It's up to you, bro." Peach and Toad's expressions remained unchanged, non-verbally deferring their decision as well.

Mario mulled over the situation for a few seconds, then turned back to Bowser. "No thanks. Another time. But we appreciate it."

Bowser shrugged. "Okay. C'mon, Kruna."

"Kruna?" Mario and Luigi asked in unison.

"Croutons?" asked Toad.

"I guess I'll see you guys around," said Daisy with a wave. She and the other Kruna resumed their trek to Bowser's Palace.

"Hey!" Mario suddenly called out. The Kruna all stopped and turned around as Mario pulled out a pouch from his pocket. "You guys really look like you need these!" He chucked the pouch at Bowser and the Koopa King caught it.

Bowser unraveled the string that kept the pouch closed and shook the contents out into one of his hands, perking up once he realized what they were. "They're Ultra Mushrooms!"

"I only have those six," said Mario. "But you can take them all. I can get more at a later time. Keep the pouch too."

The Kruna of Fire gazed at the Mushrooms he held for a couple of moments before he tilted his head up to look at Mario. With graciousness in his voice, Bowser said, "Thank you."

Mario cracked a slight smile. "You're welcome."

The Koopa King passed around an Ultra Mushroom to each of the Kruna. When he got to Daisy, she replied, "I'll pass. Save one for Andrew. That gash of his is gonna need all the healing it can get."

"With all due respect, you've been beaten down the most out of all of us," said Bowser. "Please, take the Mushroom. I'll give up mine for Andrew."

"To be honest, I don't think I've put myself in the line of fire as often as the rest of you," Ramona murmured. "Especially considering what happened with Deyanira. I'll gladly give mine to Andrew, or maybe I could split one with him-"

"Ramona, I'm not going to take a Mushroom," Daisy asserted. "You guys were essentially drained the moment we followed Elkon into the Twelfth Dimension."

"Uh, we all were!" stated Athelstan. "Including you!"

"I sense a circular argument," said Daisy.

Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Toad all listened intently to everything the Kruna spoke of. The more they heard, the more amazed they became.

"You know what Daisy," Warra began, somewhat irritated. "One day, your body's just going to completely break down on you, and it'll all be because you didn't give it the recovery it so desperately needed."

"What are you, my mom?" Daisy snapped with a smirk. "Save one for Andrew, Bowser. I'm not using any. I'll deal."

"If you insist," Bowser said, placing the remaining Ultra Mushroom back in the pouch. He tossed it to Ramona. "For Andrew."

I don't know why you feel so compelled to not use the Ultra Mushroom, but you're a grown person, Warra mused. *I would have much rather preferred it if I gave mine up, but I was too slow to say anything.* He then smiled. *I guess that's just something I should come to expect from you; looking out for everybody else before your own self. With your kind of character, I'm glad you're in charge.*

"I got a fever!" Marut shouted. "And the only prescription, is Ultra Mushrooms!" He flipped his mushroom into his mouth and started chewing on it.

"Poppin' 'shrooms to feel better, huh?" mumbled Athelstan, chuckling as he ate the Ultra Mushroom he received. Ramona, Warra, and Bowser proceeded to eat theirs. Except for Daisy, the Kruna could all feel a large chunk of vitality returning to their bodies.

They were still fairly banged up, but it was not as apparent as before.

"Hey, thanks again," Daisy said, directing her attention to the Mushroom Kingdom crew. "Don't think I'm saying that just 'cause. This means a lot. I'm serious."

Mario nodded. "Whatever you guys are up to...good luck."

"Coming from the great Mario, that's very much appreciated!" replied Athelstan.

Bowser waved his arm and started walking in the direction of his palace. "Come along now, everyone."

The Kruna bid quick farewells to Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Toad, then followed the Koopa King. Discussion could be heard among them as they walked down the street underneath the cascading lights from the lampposts. Peach found herself staring at the departing Kruna until they were out of the range of vision and hearing. Even after they were gone, she was still gazing off in their direction.

"Well, that just happened," said Toad. "Let's get back to the castle! I'm hungry!"

"Should we be worried about Bowser?" asked Luigi, his eyes flared open.

Nobody said anything at first, but Peach eventually replied, "No. I don't think so. I don't think so at all."

"I guess not," murmured Mario. *What could have possibly changed in Bowser?* he then thought.

"Yeah, he's a softie now," said Toad.

"I wouldn't say that," Peach responded with a giggle. "But, I think that there has definitely been a change that we did not witness."

"We should pay more attention to Daisy," Luigi said. "But first...I'm going to BECOME A DOCTOR!"

Mario shook his head while responding, "No you're not-"

"Oh yes I am..." Luigi declared, slow and steady.

"You'll have to deal with life-size viruses," said Mario.

"Never mind!" Luigi mumbled.

"An interesting story, Rosalina," said Lubba, the large, purple luma, peering out into space from just outside the garden dome of the Comet Observatory. "But even more interesting is the group of elemental wielders that partook in it."

Rosalina nodded as she stood beside Lubba, sipping from her cup of green tea. "Great elemental wielders. Not the best by any means, but this was their mission to take."

Lubba looked at the Elder of the Cosmos in wonder. "What do you mean by that?"

Rosalina set her cup down on her plate. "Could better wielders have completed the mission? Absolutely. No doubt. We have on record several dozens of better elemental wielders out there."

Lubba frowned. "Then why not send the better wielders out there in the first place?"

Rosalina was quiet for a few moments, but then smiled. "They were not destined to undergo this elemental odyssey. It's as simple as that. Who would have really thought that the group of elemental wielders that did go on this journey would have been the only ones capable of completing such a mission?"

"Not me," Lubba replied.

"And yet, they were," said Rosalina. "Even if I defied destiny and sent the best of the best to confront Elkon and his guardians, they would have all failed miserably."

Lubba cocked an eyebrow, confused. "And why is that?"

Rosalina took another sip from her tea. "Because. It's not about the skills that Daisy and her team have; they weren't successful because of the abilities they possess." She didn't say anything extra after that.

"Their skills played a factor," said Lubba.

"Yes," Rosalina agreed. "Albeit a small one." A star lit up and expanded off in the distance, brilliantly shining and spiraling in place before receding to its original state. Eight neon shooting stars – red, blue, black, brown, green, white, gold, and purple – branched out from the previously animated celestial body. After drifting through the cosmos in individualized loops, the shooting stars then assembled together and flew off into the west.

Rosalina took a deep, relaxed breath. "I wonder if the moment they were chosen to take on their great mission, all that followed became preordained. I'll venture so far as to say that they may turn out to be one of – if not *the* – best team of Kruna that we've ever had."

"You mean as good as the group that sealed away Osiris?" asked Lubba.

Rosalina didn't respond, feeling that she didn't need to justify or verify herself.

"Well, that remains to be seen," Lubba remarked with a chuckle. "Nobody smiled when Osiris dominated the Earth."

"Maybe because the Kruna at the time were not of the same caliber as the current Kruna," said Rosalina, taking another sip from her cup. "You should inform the rest of the committee to keep an eye on them. Those elemental wielders are really something special. I didn't bestow unto them the mantle of 'Kruna' for no reason. They're going to accomplish great things, great things indeed."

Chapter XLII - FINAL

Autumn is a Time for New Beginnings :

Bowser rushed to the front doors of his palace to answer the persistent early morning knocks. "Who in their right mind is knocking on my door at six in the morning?!" he grumbled. "It's still dark outside!" He got to the main level and ran into the vestibule, trying to think who could possibly be out there in his yard. Surprise overcame his face as he opened the doors to see Peach standing with a small, green duffel bag in her hands. She was by herself, her Royale kart parked in the driveway outside of the metal fence that served as the boundary for the palace yard.

"Hi," said Peach, jovial in her tone and mannerisms.

"Hello," Bowser responded, a little confused by her visit. "What brings you here?"

"May I come inside, please?" the princess asked.

Bowser rubbed one of his eyes, not moving at first but then eventually stepping aside to allow entrance. "Just be quiet. Everyone else is still asleep."

Bowser led Peach through the hallways of his palace and into the main dining room, a grand and spacious room with magnificent, fine decorations and an overall regal deign consistent with the rest of the building. A couple koopas were up, getting breakfast ready in the kitchen adjacent to the dining room. Smells of eggs and pancake batter were just beginning to fill the air.

Peach followed the Koopa King as he walked towards the dining room table and told her what the Kruna were up to last night. "We ate, we hung out for a little while, and then Daisy talked about everything that went down in her battle with Elkon..." He stopped walking and turned around, gesturing towards one of the chairs. "You may sit, if you like."

The princess proceeded to pull a chair out from the table, taking a seat and placing her duffel bag on her lap. "So Daisy's a great fighter, huh?" she asked.

"Well, yes, and no," replied Bowser, opting to remain standing. "Offensively, unstoppable. But when she can't land her attacks for whatever reason, very vulnerable. We've seen that happen a couple times, unfortunately. She's got more gaps than she realizes, but at the same time, she usually is able to pull something together at the end when it's most needed." He chuckled. "But then again, all of us on the team have our own strengths and weaknesses. That may just be what makes us all compliment each other so well; we always have one or two people that excel in certain situations that we can rely on."

"I would have never known," said Peach. "I'm starting to think Mario and Luigi should've taken her along on their quests and missions. She probably would've been a great help."

"She was the heart of our team," said Bowser. "That's for sure. She carried us."

"That's amazing," the princess remarked. "Truly."

You barely spoke to me before, but now you're holding down a conversation with me like we've been friends for years , Bowser mused, peering in the direction of the kitchen. *I don't know what you're up to, princess. I don't understand what you're trying to accomplish, but I know that I'm through being the aggressor.* He turned his gaze back to Peach. "Do you want something to eat while you're here?"

Peach smiled. "That would be lovely."

The two koopas came out from the kitchen ten minutes later with a platter of scrambled eggs, a short stack of pancakes, two sausages, and a cup of tea with a lemon wedge. They presented the food to the princess along with the necessary utensils. She thanked the koopas for the meal and ate as she continued listening to Bowser.

"She told us she wants to head out this afternoon," said the Kruna of

Fire. "We kept urging for her to give herself more rest, but she insisted that she wants to get back out on the road – or rather, that she needs to. I don't know, it's hard to tell with her. Ramona and Andrew offered to go and retrieve my truck and her bike when they wake up so that Daisy'll have transport, but she declined even that. I guess it might be because she can't take it with her where she's heading. She didn't even say where she intends to go, but that's probably because she wants to make sure that she goes alone and that none of us end up following her. From my understanding, she wants to get there on foot, but it sounds like it'll be one helluva trip that way."

"Andrew," Peach murmured. "Wasn't he the one that was absent from your group last night? Did he make it here?"

"He came a little later after we arrived," Bowser answered. "So all seven of us are here." He paused for a split second. "Well, there was supposed to be eight of us..."

Peach swallowed a bite from her food, then frowned. "I'm so sorry to hear."

Bowser closed his eyes and sighed. "It's fine. Losses are always tough. This was one of those that stung a little more because of who he was, what his life meant. I think a little bit of each of us died with him when it happened. But the good thing is that his tormented soul can rest now."

Peach put her fork down and patted her mouth with a napkin. Her face began to appear sullen and somewhat dour.

"It was definitely a tough mission," the Kruna of Fire continued, reopening his eyes. "For all of us. I don't even have a single clue as to what day today is – it's been that kind of journey."

"Today's Sunday," Peach replied, her change in tone evident. "Today's Sunday..." She pushed her chair away from the table a little to unzip and dig into her duffel bag. "I'm glad that you're here now, that you've finished your journey. I owe you something...that I should have given you years ago."

Bowser's eyes widened as Peach pulled from her bag a set of items that he recognized right away; the crowns of his mother and father placed on top of his mother's cape. A letter rested in the former Koopa King's crown.

"Please," Peach begged, extending the items to Bowser for him to take. "They wanted you to have them. I didn't have the courage to give them to you in the past. They left you a letter that they insisted that you read."

After grabbing hold of his parents' crowns and cape, he pulled out a chair and set them down in the seat. He then grabbed the letter and sliced through the envelope in one fluid motion. As he took out the paper from within and unfolded it, his body began to tremor. There was no telling what was in store for him, what that paper would read, what it would mean, for he had absolutely no idea. The longer he waited to read, the more his imagination would try to play with his mind. Although absent the entire time that Peach was there that morning, that blank look that Bowser had been too accustomed to seeing from her was now on full display.

With a deep breath, Bowser began to read the letter aloud. "Dearest son; we're sorry that you had to be forced to the throne well before you were ready, but your father and I just couldn't return this time. With faith in your ability to uphold the Koopa Clan's virtues of honor, morality, and peace, we leave the way of the koopas in your hands. We are proud to have you as our son. Love forever and always, Mom and Dad." At the conclusion of his reading, Bowser's expression slowly faded into one of indignation.

"The downfall of the Mushroom Kingdom was imminent at the time," said Peach. "It was a very harsh period, and many of our citizens were losing their calm and their sanity as panic overtook the nation. We engaged in economic and diplomatic relations with the Koopa Clan to try and stage a recovery for us with mutual benefits for both sides."

Bowser folded up the letter and placed it back inside the envelope, placing that back on top of his parents' items. It was clear that he was disgruntled, but it was somehow muted and subdued.

Peach's hair shifted to cover her eyes. "I didn't mean for any violence. I was in charge of the talks with your parents for sharing of resources between the Mushroom Kingdom and the Koopa Clan, although, some of my associates had become very irritable and restless during one particular meeting. They sparked fights and started conflicts that turned ugly, despite my urging for calm and peace. When we returned to the kingdom that day, mass rallies were started to increase propaganda for overrunning the Koopa Clan. Our people were so terrified of collapse and failure that civil wars flared up. Everyone was trying to blame our horrible situation on someone else rather than trying to talk things out and reach a non-violent resolution. The movement for invasion of neighboring sovereign lands gained steam as a way of promoting the unity of our own people. To them, directing their aggression to other nations was a more favorable course of action than destroying each other, and a much more favorable course of action than trying to resolve our own issues."

At this point, the two koopas in the kitchen came back into the dining room. They had intended to check and see if Bowser or Peach wanted anything, but were troubled by the anguish that developed within both the princess and the Koopa King.

"In an act of self-preservation, our parliament instated Order 66 in what was an almost unanimous decision," Peach further explained. "I was the lone opposing vote, but if I didn't conform with the parliament's demands, they would've vetoed any word I made against them and they would've impeached me and relieved me from my title and duties as Princess of the Mushroom Kingdom. With weeks of civil unrest and our kingdom on the verge of utter collapse, I wasn't given much of a choice. So I gave in, and went along with their desires. Back then, all I cared about was keeping my position. Now, I wish I was removed from office. It wasn't fair. I hated every second of it. To this day, I have no idea how I am able to live with myself."

Bowser closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. The tension on his face could not be hidden or disguised in any way.

"Your parents didn't make it, as you may or may not have been able to figure out by now," Peach said. "I cried every night for weeks with

all the death that was caused. It wasn't fair, that I, the ruler of the Mushroom Kingdom and the one who should've had the final say in things, was overruled by my own people and parliament. I was very depressive over it, and unfortunately, it didn't stop there, because they would demand for two more invasions of other lands before the necessary changes were able to be made."

She was sitting right there. No Mario, no Luigi, no problem. A claw to her neck, a Tavado at point-blank range, a plasma beam through her heart, it was all possible, and nobody would be able to say or do a thing about it. If there was going to be a chance to slay the murderer of his parents, now was the time. The only problem was, Peach was not the murderer. Peach was not the cause of the genocide of the koopas. She was as much a victim as Bowser was, even if the two were always on opposite sides. *I've learned too much from this journey...to regress,* the Koopa King thought, opening his eyes as he thought about Kokoro, Grekka, Elkon, and Daisy.

Peach made a couple of sniffles. "Since then, our Kingdom has had a massive turnover and has gone through a period of revival and reform. Most if not all of the corruption from that period has been removed, and much of what was wrong with our system was righted. As the ruler of the land, I urged and enforced that we be a peaceful nation so that we can distance ourselves from our dismal past. But still, there's probably nothing I can do to make up for all the losses that you and others had to endure back then." Tears streamed down her face. "I'm so sorry, king."

"Sir, what do you want us to do?" asked one of the koopas, grimacing in utter seriousness.

The lighthearted atmosphere that initially existed in the room had vanished, and yet Bowser decided to cracked a faint smile. "Nothing. We're not going to do a thing. We're going to let the princess finish her meal. And I told you before, you don't have to call me 'sir' or 'king.' Just Bowser'll do."

Peach rubbed her eyes, trying to clear away the searing burn of her tears "What... Aren't you mad?"

"Yes. I am mad," Bowser admitted. "Well, I should be mad. I'm more upset rather. I should be shocked as well, but I'm not too much. I never knew, but in a way, I was expecting it...as if I did know, as if I had every reason to think it and was just awaiting some form of confirmation."

Instead of letting up, the flow of tears from Peach's eyes increased. The two koopas, full of uncertainty, exchanged looks.

"It's not your fault," the Kruna of Fire murmured. "Don't dwell on it. Please. I'm not going to hold it against you."

"It doesn't change the fact that it happened," Peach whimpered.

"Yeah, I know," Bowser replied, turning to head in the direction of the front doors. "But it can't be helped. We're both victims of the times we live in, unfortunately... If you'll excuse me, I need to go and take care of something. I have to step out. You can stay here if you want, but I need to go right now."

Peach started rubbing her eyes again, sniffling and sobbing. "I'm sure Toad has something for you should you need it," she offered as the Koopa King walked out of the room. "You're welcome into the castle any time." Bowser heard her, but moved at an increasing pace and did not respond to her.

The princess wiped her eyes with a new napkin and sat there in the chair for a while. She could feel her heart racing, her body getting anxious. Just drawing her attention to her distress made her start to tear up again.

"Please, finish your food, Princess Toadstool," one of the koopas urged.

"I'm sorry, you guys," Peach began. "Things didn't happen the way they should have and-"

"It's fine, princess," the other koopa assured. "It's absolutely fine. It wasn't your fault. Your food's going to get cold, you know."

In the very same room she had slept in the last time she was at Bowser's Palace, Daisy was sitting up in bed, rummaging through the backpack she had left behind. "I'm a little upset that I forgot my backpack here," she murmured to herself, still half-asleep. She pulled out a rolled-up world map. "This could've came in handy."

She unraveled the map and scanned it, keying her eyes in on one specific location on the far right side. *I have to go there,* she affirmed in her mind. *I have to* .

For a while, she wondered if she would be able to go back to sleep. She felt like the anticipation for her next destination would prevent her from getting the necessary rest that her body so desperately needed. But she knew she had to recuperate now. The quicker she recovered, even if only a small fraction of her full health and power, the faster she could get started on her next task.

Daisy peered out her window and saw that it was getting brighter outside, but not by a lot. It was still dark out, which meant she had some time. With a great big yawn, she threw her hands up to the ceiling. She then collapsed and sprawled out on the bed, falling back asleep without even realizing it. Her backpack stayed on the mattress, but her map fell to the floor right beside the bed.

Bowser arrived at The Forest Meadow as the sun started to cast its golden shine through the blue and red early morning sky, the Dimensional Mirror secured in his shoulder pocket. He stood in wait, expecting Rosalina to sense his presence and send an astral clone down for communication. It wasn't long before the Elder of the Cosmos teleported into the clearing, opting to appear and speak with the Kruna of Fire in person.

"You knew what happened to them all along," Bowser accused with a smirk. "You liar."

Rosalina shrugged and smiled; a very rare expression that was not often seen from the Elder of the Cosmos at all. "Yes. I guess you could say that."

Bowser crossed his arms. "Care to explain? Why didn't you tell me in the first place?"

"I knew all long what happened to your parents," Rosalina said. "But you had to go through this journey to liberate yourself and your spirit from the stranglehold that the invasion had on you for all these years. Had I told you before, you would've waged all-out war." She locked eye contact with the Kruna of Fire. "Instead of trying to bring back honor to the koopas through revenge, instead of waging a war on the Mushroom Kingdom, I wish you'd look past that and move towards diplomacy and sovereign peace, leading others by example in doing so."

Bowser thought back to the soul that attacked him in the Dimension of the Lost, and remembered what Warra had said to him in response to why the soul had attacked the Koopa King when it was already in purgatory. *We're in a world where you can't even hope to understand another's reasons for their actions now,* Warra had said that day.

"We're in a world where you can't even hope to understand another's reasons for their actions now," Bowser recited to Rosalina. "Warra had said this to me several days ago."

"The wisdom of water wielders, I see," Rosalina remarked.

"At the time, I didn't think too much of it, and thought it was just limited to that dimension," Bowser said. "But now I see, that sometimes that statement has validity in our world as well. And I also see, that that's what I've been basing a lot of my own rationale for my actions on. Why talk if nobody would understand, I always thought. It was my impression that the only thing people truly understood was action, and even then, people could very easily still misunderstand that. But who was I to try and get people to understand through fighting and war? Misunderstanding can so easily lead to conflict and then afterwards, pain, only to sprout hatred. War just leads to even more pain and more hatred. Nobody wins with war in the end, no matter the outcome..." He tilted his head up and looked into the dark sky mixed with bright streaks. The sun would be up in the air soon, bringing new light to the world. "I understand much more than I did before, much more." He paused,

but when he spoke, he was absolute in his voice. "I am the Kruna of Fire! I will carry on the proud legacy of those koopas who have fallen, and the heart of the Koopa Clan will live on through my people and myself the way it was intended to!"

A swath of wind blew through the forest, blowing into Rosalina's back and into Bowser's face. It lasted a few moments before it died down. "That makes me proud, Koopa King," she said in praise. "More than you would believe."

Bowser took out the Dimensional Mirror from his pocket, handing it to the Cosmic Queen. "Here. It has served its purpose well. I believe I must return it to you."

Rosalina closed her eyes and waved off the Kruna of Fire's gesture. "I think it's in good hands. Let it be a souvenir, a memento of your great quest."

A strong sense of gratitude overcame Bowser as he retracted his arm and put away the mirror. He tried to say something, but stopped, at a loss for words. Instead, he bowed his head, saying, "Thank you, Grand Elder. Thank you for sending me on this journey."

"Don't thank me," Rosalina happily replied. "Thank the stars. Thank destiny."

Daisy and Warra stood on a hill overlooking Mushroom Kingdom's Castle Town. They decided to hang out there and take in the scenery for just a little while before Daisy departed. The mid-morning sun was up, filling the area with golden hues and bathing the chirping birds and squirrels. To Daisy, the calm breeze felt just the way it did when she and Bowser started their mission that one fateful night, and yet, everything was so different back then. There was no possible way that she could have anticipated what their quest was going to be like or just how far they would all be pushed. The calm that came with completing their mission felt strange and out of place. Even after all that happened, she couldn't just sit by and enjoy the ambience. Deep down, she knew they weren't done.

No, this was just the beginning of many things to come...for everyone. She peered at Warra for a brief moment, her mouth drifting open as if she wanted to ask him something. He turned his head and caught her looking at him before she said anything.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Daisy responded. "It's just that...your hair is really long for a guy."

Warra shrugged. "Personal preference really. I'm not trying to please anybody with it."

"No no, I'm not saying that it's bad," said Daisy, waving her hands. "It's unique. That's a good thing."

Her remark garnered a smile from the Kruna of Water, but he didn't say anything further on the subject. *Ugh, that was stupid!* Daisy yelled in her mind. *Why did I have to mention his hair?! Who says that about someone's hair? I should ask Bowser about his spikes next time I see him while I'm at it.*

"Aren't your friends here going to be upset to know that you're leaving again?" Warra asked.

"Well, no, not really," Daisy innocently replied. "I mean, Mario, Luigi, Peach, all the rest; they're my friends and all, but a lot of the time, I wonder why. They don't really include me in a lot of their plans, and they've definitely never included me in any of their missions or adventures. It's pretty annoying, really. I know that last night, I said I didn't mind it, but I think I actually do. I just wasn't trying to cause a scene so late when we were all so tired. It sorta feels like either they think I'm not able enough or they think I'm not important enough. To be honest, it feels like they all ignore me a lot."

"They don't know what they're missing, I'd say," Warra remarked.

Daisy perked up. "Really? You really think that?"

Warra chuckled a little. "C'mon, I don't need to answer that. You already know what I'm going to say."

"Thanks, Warra. Hearing that means a lot; more than you may know."

"I think I have a good idea."

Daisy sighed. "Okay, I wasn't paying attention to your hair. I wanna ask you something, and you can decline if you want."

His attention seemed to be geared towards something other, but he answered, "Sure. Ask away."

"Well," she began. "Remember in the very beginning, when you said that you and your family were all servants to the rulers of your land?"

Warra nodded. "Yeah. What about it?"

"That's just it," replied Daisy. "I wanted to know if you could give me some insight on-"

Suddenly, a violent boom became audible, paired with a violent convulsion of the ground. The two elemental wielders kept their balance during the unexplained event, trying to look for the source of the disturbance but without any luck.

"Kruna," A deep, brooding voice echoed throughout the landscape.

A shadow was cast over the entire land, prompting Daisy and Warra to turn and look up into the sky. Overhead was a godly figure, no distinct features able to be made out from his pitch black silhouette. With a simple wave of his arm, an omnidirectional swath of pure energy cut through the atmosphere. Sensing his absurd, deadly level of power, Daisy transformed into her Nova state and put her arms up in time to block the energy. Her vision was obscured, but she was able to withstand the blow thanks to her timely transformation. However, she was not ready for what she saw once she lowered her arms.

All that was in her vision was red. Blood red. The sky, the land, all of it was shaded in crimson, and all of it looked dead. Geysers of magma emerged, scattered everywhere and spewing molten rock all over the land. She turned to the side only to see the entire

Mushroom Kingdom leveled and in ruin. And then she heard a screaming that shook her to her core. Right beside her, Warra was on his knees in a puddle of blood, half of his flesh searing off of his body. His voice died out as he collapsed and keeled over.

"Die...Kruna..." The massive deity bellowed. With no time to react to anything that had just happened, Daisy prepared her Seismic Wave and fired it off. The figure responded with an dark crimson energy beam of his own that clashed with Daisy's. For a moment, it looked like Daisy was going to press her attack and deal a devastating hit to the silhouette, but it would not be. The moment he started manically laughing, his beam swallowed Daisy's in its entirety and proceeded to overwhelm and consume her altogether. There was nothing she could do but try to withstand the pain of death.

You've met with a terrible fate, haven't you, my student? Terran's voice echoed.

And then Daisy woke up from her sleep. Her eyes drifted open, at which point she gasped. She shot up out of bed and looked around, taking note that everything was fine. The sun was shining outside and cast light through her window, unimpeded by the scattered clouds. Tranquility and serenity pervaded the atmosphere.

"Damn it," Daisy scowled, wiping the sweat from her forehead. "I slept in." She jumped out of bed, went to clean herself up, got her backpack and rushed out the room to leave the palace. She didn't use up any time trying to decipher what exactly went on in her dream or why. All she was concerned with was what lied ahead. Her map didn't cross her mind, and it remained in its spot partially underneath the bed.

It was an hour past noon when the Kruna all gathered in The Forest Meadow. Athelstan had pulled out three chunks of rock from the ground and shaped them into tombstones, engraving the names of Grekka, Terran, and Elkon into each one. Daisy bolted into the area, having gathered three bouquets of flowers on her way there. With the way the trees rose up into the sky, shining rays of sunlight scattered through the leaves and onto each of the tombstones and

the areas directly in front of them. Everyone stood, calm, quiet, and serious, in a spread semi-circle several yards away from the stones.

"It's about time you got here," said Athelstan. "We were waiting on you."

"We thought about waking you up, but we decided you definitely needed the rest," Warra told the Kruna of Earth. "Before you got here, we each paid our respects. If you have anything you'd like to say, or not say, now's the time."

Daisy nodded, stern and somber. She walked over to the stones and set a bouquet by each one. After she finished, she knelt down in front of Terran's tombstone. Her fellow Kruna stayed quiet.

I did it, Master, Daisy proclaimed in thought. *I did everything you said I could do and more, and I did it with honor and respect, just like you taught me to. Thank you for being the one person I could depend on at a time when I most needed it.* She shifted her gaze to Grekka's and Elkon's stones in turn before standing up. Grekka's words resonated within her heart, words that she would never allow herself to forget. Elkon's words reverberated through her soul, words that would never leave her. Her interactions with both of them would forever be a part of her. *You two will live on through me, and through everything that I do. All three of you will... All three of you went well before your time.*

Daisy stepped back to stand with her team. "Rest in peace. All of you, and all who came and passed before."

"Let's give them one final moment of silence," said Warra.

The seven Kruna stood, bowing their heads without spoken word, barely making a sound. Daisy kept her head up, deep in thought. *Bowser, Grekka, Terran, Elkon, you've all been through so much* , she mused, peering at the Koopa King and the three tombstones in turn. She then looked to each of her other teammates. *Warra...Athelstan...Marut...Ramona...Andrew...you're all here now, but what were your lives like before our mission? There's a reason we were all chosen as Kruna. I wonder how much you guys have had to experience. Collectively, you haven't said too much regarding*

where you came from. Could your lives have been as turbulent...or were they somehow worse? She redirected her gaze to the tombstones. *I guess only time will tell...*

Several more moments passed in silence, each of the Kruna lost in reflection. Daisy turned around to face the path that led out of The Forest Meadow. Her teammates caught sight of her movement and looked at her. The Kruna of Earth's gaze was fixed off into the distance, her eyes glistening with intense focus. Everyone could tell that she was ready to go.

"So you're leaving now?" asked Ramona.

"Yeah," Daisy said.

"Are you sure you don't want us to come along?" asked Andrew.

"I'm sure," Daisy replied, taking a handful of steps towards the path. "I need to go alone..."

"You know you have us if you need help," said Warra. "That won't change."

Daisy turned to Warra and smiled, probably one of the widest and truest smiles she ever gave. "Yeah... But this is something I need to take care of myself."

"We understand," Warra assured.

Daisy turned around to the Kruna of Fire. "Don't think I forgot, Bowser," she said with a wink and a thumbs-up.

"Daisy, don't worry about it," Bowser said, knowing full well what she was referring to. "I'm the King of the Koopas. They're my responsibility; their welfare is in my hands. It's not as daunting a task as what you're probably planning on doing."

"That doesn't mean I'm not gonna help," the Kruna of Earth asserted, turning around to start walking down the path in the direction of her destination. "I *will* see you all later."

"Yes you will," said Andrew.

"Go get 'em, Daisy," Marut said under his breath.

Ramona cupped her hands together. "We have the utmost confidence in you."

"Best of luck to ya!" Athelstan called out.

Bowser chuckled to himself. "Daisy Sarasa..."

The Kruna watched as Daisy walked into the distance. Without turning back around, she put up an arm and saluted to her friends with a lone, subtle wave as she continued moving away. After a couple minutes, she was out of sight.

"There she goes," Warra murmured. "Take care, Daisy."

Hundreds of thoughts raced through Daisy's head, and yet she somehow kept her focus on one singular task she knew she had to do. Her destination would yield a whole new challenge even tougher than the elemental odyssey of the Kruna. Her face was fierce, her steely resolve as determined as ever and her body simultaneously relaxed and tense. *It's time,* Daisy affirmed in her mind. *Time to take care of something that I should've done a long time ago.*